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Cover Story

By Valli Herman

If I spoke Sanskrit, I'd know that kaya kalpa translates to body rejuvenation or transmutation. I'm in a serene Hollywood Hills home and spa, learning about a holistic, ancient Indian treatment system for the body and soul. Raam Pandeya is president and practitioner of the Kayakalpa Alchemy Foundation, an organization that administers therapies based on his training in ayurveda, an ancient Indian healing system based on balancing the body, soul and mind; homeopathy; and arrange of spiritual doctrines and holistic medicine.

His goal "To enhance one's capabilities so one can lead a healthy, prosperous, graceful life"

This isn't a one size fits all program. Pandeya interviews me about my physical and mental traits, the workings of my internal organs and the vigor of my skin, sex life and digestion, he reads my pulse considers my line of work and attempts to explain the essence of 10,000 years of holistic Indian medicine and spiritual healing.

His treatment aims to balance what he calls the constituent elements of the body - divided into air, fire, water - and then remove toxins. For the record, I'm an air - a personality marked by intellect, restlessness, fear, anxiety, disrupted sleep and a lousy digestive system.

Centuries ago, Pandeya says the intensive kaya kalpa regime was reserved for sages and yogis who meditated in isolation for months while receiving purification treatments - everything from massage to tongue scarping. The time, costly materials and extreme nature of the process caused modern practitioners to develop kaya kalpa vatatapika, less intense four - to -five hour sessions.

Even my abbreviated treatment is a test of strength and submission. I think I am just getting a body scrub and a steam but actually I am receiving a physical and psychological make-over. Customers are presented with a release form that clarifies the purpose of the \$400 full session and states: "I understand that Kayakalpa is a technique of optimum health and beauty and is not intended as a treatment for any pathological condition." That's fine; I'm here for great skin and hair.

First my nose is "treated" with herbal drops (which will in theory amplify the link between smell and memory). Then I curse as stinging eye drops are administered (to clear my vision). Then my entire body is slathered in a thick reddish aromatic paste of 67 herbs and minerals. As the paste dries it is supposed to absorb impurities through my skin. What I know for sure is that the paste turns black and crunchy.

During the drying, I am instructed to breathe and flex muscles rhythmically. The entire procedure, the alepa aims to exfoliate dead skin cells, open the pores and enhance circulation.

To purify and nourish my skin, improve my sense of touch and strength, Pandeya pours warm oil, with 76 ingredients overt the paste as he and his wife and assistant, Sophia, vigorously, sometimes painfully, massage my body.

Now quite alert, I move to an outdoor steam chamber that looks like something out of an "I Love Lucy" episode. Its herbal steam causes sweating that further clears my pores. (purity is within my grasp!) But first I am asked to consider a most important therapy. Would I consent to an enema?

Every bathing suit model in the world swears by some kind or another of colon cleansing, but I have no professional obligation for a flat stomach. I decline.

The I slide into a deep extra hot bath where my head is aligned on a pillow to receive the 30 minute sirodhara, a mixture of herbs, minerals, milk and warm oil that's dripped continuously on my forehead, reportedly to stimulate my pituitary gland and clear the central nervous system.

It's difficult to take the heat of the bath and the oil. For hours afterward I'm flushed and thirsty but feeling incredibly relaxed and yes, pure. With oily hair I attend an interview, to be told, "Wow, you have great skin" and "You smell like Indian food." How we suffer for beauty.