



# holistic healing at fivelements

writer Rebecca Walker

I arrive in Bali in mid-January, hungry for a cleanse. The festivities of December have caught up with me, and weeks of over-indulging over Christmas have left me feeling energetically depleted and a tad toxic. Luckily for me, I am booked in for a five-day 'Panca Mahabhuta' retreat at one of Bali's best holistic healing sanctuaries – Fivelements, Puri Ahimsa. Promising purification, balancing and regeneration in the form of traditional healing rituals, living foods and sacred arts, this integrative concoction is just what the doctor ordered, and as the plane wheels touch down in Indonesia, I feel lighter already.

I arrive in Bali late at night, and after a one-hour drive to the outskirts of Ubud, pull into Fivelements where I follow a winding pathway past lush gardens and over footbridges to the riverside oasis (aptly named 'Apah', meaning water) that will be my home for the next week. My villa's giant bed looks bigger than my entire compact studio apartment in Hong Kong, and as I climb under draping white curtains into its comfy embrace, I feel instantly smitten with my new surroundings.

## DAY ONE

I wake up early to the delicious sound of rain pattering on the roof. I bounce out of bed and head out to the balcony where I jump straight onto my computer to do some work before forcing myself to stop and take in the view around me. I drink in the sight of ardent vegetation and the rushing creek below and reflect on the stark contrast between this and my everyday reality (waking up to the sound of jackhammers and blaring horns).

I order a breakfast of sautéed greens, grilled tomatoes and mushrooms, topped with my favourite Indonesian specialty, tempeh, then head to the healing village for my first treatment — a Balinese Boreh. My therapist Iluh begins the ritual by asking me to close my eyes while she aligns her energy with mine. She takes my hands in hers, and I feel a tingle travel through my hands and arms as she chants quietly.

Iluh then treats me to an invigorating foot scrub before moving me to a waiting table where she dives straight into a deep tissue massage. I've asked for strong pressure, and like a hairbrush gliding through a knotted clump of hair, Iluh's expert fingers knead the kinks out of my tangled muscles. She then applies a coffee and cinnamon herb powder and scrubs me from head to toe before leading me to a waiting bathtub. Iluh throws flower petals into the water (red for energy, pink for love, yellow for clarity and purple for spiritual inspiration), then leaves me to soak in peaceful contemplation for the next 20 minutes.

This blissful experience is followed by a consultation with Janur, who asks me about my healing goals for the week ahead and my wider intentions for 2012. We start talking about work and Hong Kong, my old life in Australia and my dreams for the future. Among other things, we touch on love, and Janur tells me that he'd like to help me take my 'heart armour' off. Sounds good to me.

My next treatment is a holistic massage and prana session with Balinese healer Dewa Sumandia. Said to create energetic harmony in the body by eliminating blockages in the 'nadis' (energy channels), this holistic treatment claims to charge depleted areas of the body with 'prana' (energy) through energy healing, Shiatsu-style acupressure and traditional Balinese massage. I lie on my back as Sumandia 'scans' my body with his hands before quickly honing in on my stomach. "The



problem is here," he announces. He's right. My stomach has long been a physical barometer of my emotional state; when I am stressed or worried, it knots instantly. Although I'd marked my stress levels at a five out of 10 on my consultation form, I am an over-thinker at the best of times and am not surprised that Sumandia has pinpointed my weakest zone.

He tells me that I have been hiding from romantic love, and that once I can melt the pain in my heart, the pain in my belly will dissipate. Again, he's right. I have been single for close to two years and I busied myself with work and travel the entire time. Sumandia navigates my navel zone with care, gently massaging my stomach before moving down to acupressure points in my legs and feet. He then flips me on my back and massages my neck and skull, telling me that the blockage in my navel has led to a blockage in my neck and that I need to create a more loving pathway between my head and heart. I finish the session feeling vulnerable and a little fragile and head back to my room to process the day's events.

#### DAY TWO

I wake up after a 10-hour sleep, feeling refreshed and rested. After enjoying a breakfast of fresh fruit, coconut yoghurt and red rice congee, I make my way up to the healing centre where Janur awaits. We talk through my thoughts and emotions, and I tell him I already feel like a totally different person from the one that arrived only 24 hours before — largely because my internal frequency has changed its rhythm

so quickly and drastically. My session with Janur is followed by a 'Tantra healing' yoga class with Balinese yoga instructor Made Agus Wirayasa.

Based on the philosophy of Ananda Marga ('the path of bliss') yoga, which aims to balance the inner and outer 'selves' by expanding physical, mental and divine awareness, Agus's practice is a spiritually guided one. He guides me through a meditation exercise, chanting in Sanskrit, before leading me through a gentle flow sequence. I'm used to practising in a crowded room, during lunch hour at one of Hong Kong's most popular studios, so having the shala all to myself with a teacher is a true treat. The pace of the practice is slower than my usual classes, and it gives me time to pause and relish each pose more deeply. Agus circles me like a watchful guardian, reminding me to breathe and bringing my attention to the 'chakras' (energy centres). We practice for an hour and finish with another meditation.

Although I've enjoyed the class, I feel waves of nausea beginning to wash over me and go back to my room to lie down. The nausea builds, as does a heavy pressure in my head, and I suspect yesterday's prana healing session has released a blockage in my abdomen that is only just beginning to surface. I cancel my next treatment, sip on some ginger tea and curl into a ball on the bed instead. Close to three hours later, I wake feeling completely different. The nausea has passed and the fog in my head has lifted.

I head straight to the *Agni Hotra*

(ceremonial fire space) where I'm scheduled for a water blessing ceremony with the resort's resident temple priest, Putu Sukawinaya. Janur meets me there, and before we begin, asks me what I want to let go of in my life (my answer is fear) and what I want to embrace (my answer is trust). Dressed in a sarong, I sit and close my eyes in meditation as Putu begins chanting Sanskrit mantras and ringing sacred bells to invoke prosperity and healing. Right at this moment the heavens open up and an almighty rainstorm pours down outside the temple and I can't help but read into the significance of its timing.

Putu continues chanting for close to an hour, and as advised by Janur, I focus on my mantra of trust and the feeling of safe support that comes with it. Putu stops chanting, and on cue, the rain stops. We walk onto the lawn and Putu asks me to take sips of the water he has just blessed, before pouring the rest of the jug over my head and body. The cold water takes my breath away and I am overwhelmed by the cleansing sensation of stale energy leaving my spirit.

My next treatment is a water healing session with Italian healer Isabella Matrundola (better known as Isa). I have never experienced watsu, and consequently, my anticipation levels are pretty high as I step into the warm pool and listen to Isa's instructions. She tells me I will be wearing a nose plug and explains that I'll spend as much time under the water as above it; a prickle of nerves rush over me, but Isa's soothing presence is immediately calming.

Isa puts me into a cradle position and begins to rock me in the water, and I am pleasantly surprised to hear beautiful music and realise that the pool has underwater speakers. She moves my body left and right, up and down, and I feel my limbs and head relax in her arms. It's impossible not to feel like a child in this position, and I relinquish my adult mind and let myself flow without resistance.

Before long, Isa starts to roll and dip me under the water. My intellectual mind yells "this woman is trying to drown you!" but my wiser self relaxes into the sensation and allows me to flop, submerged, like a wet rag doll. Amazingly, I feel completely comfortable under the water and understand why people often describe watsu as a womb-like experience. The sensation can be compared to floating and flying at the same time, and I imagine myself as a fish and a bird, soaring and diving above and under the water.

As someone who has minor control freak tendencies, it is so utterly liberating to surrender and let someone else move my body for me, and as Isa glides me through the water, at times tumbling me in somersaults, I feel utterly free. When the session finally draws to an end, I feel a sense of deep weightlessness and float back to my room in a dreamy haze.

#### DAY THREE

I wake late and enjoy a leisurely breakfast of fresh fruit washed down with a superfood smoothie before making my way to the

healing centre for a *Panca Mahabhuta* session with Balinese healer Wayan Partha. Said to clear unhealthy energy (encompassing emotional, mental and physical), this sacred ritual works to balance 'buana alit' (the microcosm of the human body) with the 'buana agung' (the macrocosm of the natural world) by aligning the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether within the body (small world) with the cosmic energy of the universe (great world).

I lie on my back and Wayan begins to chant in Sanskrit, hovering his hands above my head. I feel an intense vibration rush over me, and lie very still as his hands quiver and shake above my third eye. After a lengthy period he moves to my chest, then eventually my belly, and I feel myself slip into a deeper meditative state with each pit-stop. Like a steel scourer scraping grime off an old pan, I imagine the energy in his hands shining a light on dark patches of prana in my body and cleaning them. Further, I sense dormant energies awakening from their lazy slumber.

"You have a blockage in your hip and neck," he tells me before rolling me onto my side and digging his thumbs into my left buttock and down the outside of my IT band. I'm impressed. Although now healed (or so I thought), I was nursing a sciatic nerve injury in my left leg for most of last year, and Wayan has honed right into the injury zone. He moves from my hip up to my neck and proceeds to poke and prod at the muscles and tendons at the top of my spine. Afterwards, Wayan tells me through

a translator that the energy in the left side of my body (the feminine/moon/yin side) is less fluid than in the right (the masculine/sun/yang side) and suggests I practise more meditation and visualisation, focusing healing awareness on the areas that feel weaker.

My next treatment is a metaphysical massage with local healer Ketut Wena. Based on the belief that negative mental patterns result in physical disease or illness, metaphysical massage is said to realign the body's energy by transforming negative patterns into positive ones. Ketut greets me with a huge smile and tells me to lie down on my back. Starting at my head, he walks around the table, tapping various points on my face, hands and feet.

Ketut quickly hones in on my tummy and declares, "You are blocked here." I nod in agreement, and he sprinkles little pieces of tissue over my belly. "Please watch," he directs. I look down and am slightly alarmed to see the pieces of tissue bouncing in the air, in response to his hand movements. "Can you feel the energy?" he asks. I most certainly can. It feels as though a warm current is moving through my stomach, and a few minutes later I let out a squeal as tiny electric shocks prickle across my abdomen. "Sorry!" Ketut laughs. "The energy is very strong."

I have experienced innumerable types of energy healing in my time but I have

THIS PAGE: *Healing Dance; Therapy*. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Chi Nei Tsang massage*. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Yoga; Pathway*. OPENING PAGE: *Flower bath*.



never experienced this kind of sensation; the feeling is comparable to a strong static zap, and I involuntarily jump each time the charge meets my skin. By this point I am slightly on edge, wondering how long this slightly painful process will continue, when Ketut switches tactics and starts to massage my muscles using therapeutic acupressure.

His touch is deep yet gentle, and I feel myself relaxing as he sweeps out the kinks and crunches of my shoulders and neck. Ketut spends extra time on my somewhat tender tummy before moving back to his original starting point at my head. "Your energy looks much better now!" he exclaims. I rise from the table, and lo and behold, feel much more even and steady — like a set of scales that is perfectly balanced.

After a dip in the pool and a delicious lunch of coconut crepes and sautéed vegetables, my final treatment for the day is a chakra-balancing massage with Kundalini master Dewa Sulendra. Said to create harmony between the physical, mental and emotional aspects of the body, this intuitive technique re-activates and balances the body's seven chakras (energy centres) through healing touch.

Dewa's spiritual presence strikes me immediately, and as we sit cross-legged across from each other in meditation, a tangible intensity fills the space, a feeling that is enhanced by the sound of thunder clapping in the far distance. He asks me to sit straight and concentrate on the each energy centre one at a time and he mutters and tuts to himself as he traces their location with his hand. "Your mind is very crowded," he comments. "And your stomach is congested. They are linked."

Dewa is the fourth healer to point this out, and since I know the former is responsible for the latter, I try to calm my mind and let go of the niggling worries that are slowing down my healing process. Ironically, the more I try to quiet my mind, the louder it becomes. Among other things, my thoughts range from the 500-plus emails that are no doubt waiting to be read in my inbox; the new flat that I'm moving into the week I return to Hong Kong; the article I'm writing in my head this very moment; and a trip I'm planning to Australia later in the year. While these thoughts are in no way



THIS PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT): *Beauty Sanctuary*; *Raw Vegan Cuisine*. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Daily prayer*.

insignificant, they are certainly not worthy of stealing my attention away from the experience at hand.

Dewa asks me to lie on my back and proceeds to begin acupressure on my feet. I get reflexology regularly in Hong Kong and am used to strong pressure massage, but Dewa finds hidden points on my feet that are painful enough to make my whole body squirm. The pain shoots from my feet to my belly and up to my eyebrows, and I wince and yelp in response. Dewa then finds equally painful pressure points in my hands before moving to my stomach, which he massages with gusto. I know the pain I am experiencing is a form of release, and I try to embrace the process as I breathe my way through it, but am somewhat relieved when he tells me to roll onto my stomach so we can work on the Kundalini energy in my spine.

Dewa starts to huff and puff, blowing out deep exhales as he massages my back and neck. Like the other healers, he detects a blockage in the top of my spine, which he blames for the 'heat' (aka incessant mind chatter) in my head. He asks me to sit up and talks me through a visualisation to open my crown chakra and "let out the pressure." I envision the rainbow of chakra colours (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet) charging their way up my back and bursting through the top of my head, connecting me to the divine. Dewa instructs me to keep my crown chakra open and to let cooling energy pour in as he rubs the base of my skull. It's not until this moment that the noise in my mind starts to ease, and before I know what's happening I am lying flat on

my back in peaceful repose. The session draws to an end and I feel calmer and more clear-minded than I have in months.

#### DAY FOUR

I wake early after tossing and turning for most of the night and head to the yoga shala for another tantra yoga session with Agus. We begin our session with some meditation before Agus takes me through a flow series. We bend and stretch our way through a sequence of heart and hip openers, and I am surprised to feel my legs quivering beneath me. I feel shaky and unstable, and when Made guides me through some balancing postures I fall out of poses I usually find easy. Perhaps I'm just having an off day, but it feels as though my body's internal balance has been reset since I arrived, and my centre of gravity has shifted (no doubt due to the epic amounts of energy healing I've been receiving). I surrender to the sensation, gliding gently through the rest of the class, and when I lie in *savasana* (corpse pose), Made stretches my limbs one at a time, leaving me with a feeling of satisfying length.

I follow my yoga class with another holistic massage with Sumandia and flop onto the table feeling fragile and fatigued. A dull throb is pulsing through my temples, and Sumandia intuitively picks up on it. "You have a headache?" he asks. I nod. He goes to my head and begins massaging the base of my neck, skull and jaw. Immediate relief takes hold and I drift in and out of light sleep for the rest of the session as Sumandia manipulates the muscles in my shoulders

and back. He finishes with the dreaded navel zone and tells me that although the energy has started to open up, it is still clenched tightly. Although it would be lovely to be told I've eliminated all of my blockages, I know it takes more than four days to shift this kind of energetic baggage and suspect I've made some serious healing headway.

I wander back to my room and enjoy a yummy lunch of coconut and zucchini 'noodles' (raw strips of vegetable flesh) served with organic vegetables and bean sprouts. I also scoff down a side of avocado slices doused in lemon juice and a serving of sweet potato slices. I am scheduled for an expressive arts session (a meditative movement journey in the form of dance, drama storytelling and visual arts) in the afternoon but feel my energy levels plummeting, so I cancel my appointment. Usually I would be the first person to sing and dance my way around a room, however I feel as though my body is still processing all of my treatments so far, and respect its energetic limits.

I spend the afternoon reading and writing and even sneak in an afternoon nap before heading to the Bidadari Beauty Sanctuary for my final treatment of the retreat — a purifying tea and clay detox cocoon. My therapist Sayu greets me warmly, and after the customary foot ritual, asks me to lie on the bed, where she applies a warm, thick coating of white kaolin clay and green macha tea all over my body. Rich in minerals and antioxidants, the combination of these natural ingredients is said to draw impurities out of the skin,

aiding detoxification. As I lie cocooned in a sarong, Sayu starts to massage my head, face and neck. She slides her thumbs over my sinuses and temples, melting the tension in my neck (which amazingly still crunches with knots), and I drop into a deep state of relaxation. When I rise from the table, I feel deliciously melted, and my skin is dewy and soft.

#### DAY FIVE

After a nourishing breakfast of sautéed greens and tomato benedict (buckwheat bread topped with sliced tomatoes, baby spinach and caramelised onions sprinkled with coconut hollandaise, yum!), I laze by the pool, reading my book, then head to the temple where Janur and Petut await for my closing ceremony. As Petut chants, I sit in meditation and reflect on the subtle shifts that have occurred in my mind, body and spirit over the past four days.

Like dirt being washed off a pair of grubby gumboots, I feel rinsed clean of the layer of urban dust that had settled on my spirit. Most distinctly, the clutter of thoughts in my mind that were plaguing me upon arrival have been tucked away into neat drawers, while many of my worries have dissolved altogether. My intellectual mind has gone into hiding and in its place is a deeper connection to my heart and 'gut' instinct. Of all of the emotions that float over me, the feeling of being deeply nurtured and nourished strike me the most, and I am filled with a profound sense of benevolent gratitude.

<http://fivelements.org> 🌿

a unique healing philosophy

Ensclosed by jungle from all sides and lying at the heart of a sacred valley, Fivelements is spread over two and a half thoughtfully designed acres. Encompassing two stand-alone waterfall pavilions and five enchanting bamboo suites — all named after one of the Balinese five elements: *Pertiwi* (earth), *Apah* (water), *Teja* (fire), *Bayu* (air) and *Akasa* (ether) — each space has been tastefully crafted out of locally sourced materials in harmony with the natural surroundings. Flaunting sacred spaces at every turn, the property features an eight-room healing village along with a Balinese '*Padma Sana*' temple, '*Agni Hotra*' space, herbal laboratory and multiple healing pools, all of which enhance the resort's mystical ambiance.

Founded on the ancient Balinese philosophies of '*Tri Hita Kirana*' (harmony between man and fellow man; man and nature; and man and God) and '*Tri Kaya Parisudha*' (the alignment of pure thoughts, words and deeds), Fivelements takes a mind-body-spirit approach to wellness in the form of Balinese-inspired healing rituals and a holistic sacred arts programme. Administered by local Balians (indigenous shamans), each healing journey supports the Balinese principal of '*Sekala-Niskala*', which nurtures the notion that we all live equally in two worlds — Sekala (the visible or material world), and Niskala (the intangible or spiritual realm).