

'Your future does not equal your past'

Can a luxury wellbeing retreat in Thailand run by a former monk help Hannah Summers come to terms with decades of painful inner turmoil? There's only one way to find out...

Krishna Raj delivers his hard-hitting truths alongside endearing idioms. "The further you look into the future with fear, the more you're missing out on the present," he says. "What will set you free is a rock-solid intention to heal your suffering. We all have skeletons in the closet. It's best to let them tumble out." I sink into my chair in his shaded office. I'm hours into my week-long Embracing Change programme, and decades of painful inner turmoil are starting to make sense. I reach for the box of tissues.

Here at Kamalaya, a luxury wellbeing retreat on the island of Koh Samui, in Thailand, Raj isn't just a former monk with a master's in psychology, but a "life enhancement mentor". He's here to give me the resources and wisdom to release my emotional blockages (I have many) and free me from unhelpful patterns of thought and behaviour (I have even more). "We can't prevent suffering, but we can address it," he says, nodding sagely. "And the sooner the better."

Embracing Change is designed to do that. The programme, which was launched just before Covid and has swelled in popularity as we process the aftermath of the past two years, is for those who have experienced huge change and suffering – such as grief and separation. But it is also for those seeking positive change by addressing destructive thought patterns they have become used to. That's me.

While much of the programme is based around lovely relaxing spa treatments and free time to sunbathe, visit the steam room, and practise your sun salutations in open-air yoga pavilions, the rest is talking sessions with your mentor. As a nation, we are coming



▲ Full stretch: relaxing spa treatments are included in the programme

round to opening up more: a recent YouGov survey showed 85 per cent of British people agree it's a "good idea to seek counselling or psychotherapy for a problem before it gets out of hand". I am one of them. I've had a lot of therapy, but not enjoyed a second of it. Thankfully, this is very different.

Back in session one, Raj sits cross-legged on his chair, gently coaxing my life story out of me and nodding encouragingly as I speak. Then, with a series of pregnant pauses that I suspect are the result of his 21 years of monastic life, he gives me an insightful run-through of his thoughts. Suffering in life can take many forms, from physical suffering, such as living in lockdown, to psychological suffering, what Raj describes as a "more subtle and often more damaging form of suffering that is the internal experience of how you perceive a situation in life".

For me, there is one bit of suffering that cuts deeper than the rest: my parents' short and toxic marriage, and me navigating years of fallout afterwards as a child, leading to estrangement from my mum as a teenager. It has become a negative reference point for how I live my life – even decades later. Common? Yes. Healthy? Definitely not. The result, for me, is a deep-rooted fear of history repeating itself.

Raj helps me to explore that emotional trauma. "Try looking at this from a place of wisdom, with a compassionate perspective, and not from a place of fear," he tells me. "Treat yourself and your relationships – your husband, your children, if you have them – as a separate chapter and not a continuation of what has happened in your childhood. By being gripped by a fear of becoming that, you are putting too much energy into it. It means you are missing out on so many beautiful things around you."

He's right: when I look back at my life, it has been wrapped up in a paralysing and destructive fear of the

▼ It's a safe space to feel vulnerable – and a pretty one at that: Hannah relaxes in the pool



future going cataclysmically wrong. My colourful present is so often darkened by a future that doesn't yet exist.

With a mantra of "feel life's potential", Kamalaya has positioned itself as the place to start a new journey of appreciation. Although it is very much a wellbeing retreat, it is also a safe space to feel vulnerable – and a very pretty one, at that. Coconut palms stretch skywards and fluorescent-pink bougainvillea drapes over a series of steep pathways that lead down to a peaceful stretch of sand. Meditation spots – from a huge boulder on the beach to an ancient meditation cave used by Buddhist monks for more than 300 years (the reason for the resort's location) – dot the site. Guests waft around in expensive kaftans and oversized sun hats. Warm plunge pools scatter the silent Wellness Centre and are the perfect place to wallow with a lemongrass tea while watching the sunset. There's a beautiful island beyond the walls, but I suspect nobody goes out to see it.

Instead, much of my time is spent with practitioners delivering treatments that on the face of it are stress-soothing massages, but actually blend Eastern and Western philosophies to give bigger results, such as unblocking us emotionally.

One day, I spend 90 minutes dozing through an Indian head massage, in which Ayurvedic techniques release emotional and physical tension in my body and help create mental clarity. On another, I lie back in a sunlight-filled room to try the Tree Treasures treatment, which combines tui-na massage, reiki and crystal healing to balance my mind, body and emotions, creating a feeling of peace and what is described as "integral alignment".

In the steam room, which is cut into the hillside rock, I gather stories from the fascinating guests, who include German property moguls, American models and Italian opera singers. Many are solo travellers, some even staying

a month or longer. Others are here for a week or two, recovering from burn-out, delving deep into insomnia issues, or cleansing their gut with a detox – one of the most popular programmes here. For them, food is stripped of the stuff that makes it most delicious. They wince down bright-green detox shots at breakfast and navigate dishes such as "cauliflower textures". For other guests, there is a wholesome menu featuring dhal and mung-bean pasta lasagne. I don't see a single beer on a table or at the beach, although there is plenty of organic wine being guzzled.

It all comes together to bring you that all-important mind-body balance. On another day, I meet Leila for a Bach Flower consultation. After a cathartic 90-minute chat, I'm given a concoction of seven out of 38 essences that Dr Bach, of Rescue Remedy fame, matched with particular emotions back in the 1930s. Honeysuckle is suggested to help me let go of the past, and white chestnut for overthinking. They are bottled up to pipette into my water bottle, and the list of essences is given to me to buy when I get home.

For three of my seven days, I see Bernie, the resident acupuncturist, who has tasked himself with the big job of "getting you out of your head, lady". With a series of pulse checks, tongue examinations and leg strokes, he states that my liver is invading my spleen, causing overthinking and overanalysing. "Why though? How though?" I ask, confirming his findings.

He spends part of his time pushing ultra-thin needles into my legs, back and chest, and the rest "cupping". Smothering me with Tiger balm, he uses a small glass cup to suck in the fat on my back, releasing it minutes later with a loud "pop", and leaving me with dark circles on my shoulders.

My favourite bit, though, aside from hanging on Raj's every wise word, is my time with Asha, for shirodhara therapy. In a darkened room, she gently frees my bird's-nest bun, lays me on a bed and positions a brass bowl above my head. For 30 minutes, warm, medicated oil slowly drips out of it and onto my forehead, flowing down the sides of my face to relieve tension and balance my nervous system.

I feel most relaxed in her company, but I sense some concern. She looks at me seriously as she wraps me in a sarong at the end. "Your heart is blocked and your emotions suppressed," she tells me. "Go back to your room and shut the door. If you want to cry, cry! If you want to shout, SHOUT!" I choose to do both.

The next day, I meet Raj for another session. While what has felt most useful for me is Raj's wise perspective on my fractured mind – I have pages and pages of his thoughts scrawled in a notebook, later typed up to stick on my wall – what makes up about a third of his sessions is guided meditation, tailored specifically to the trauma or woes shared that day. Although I have tried meditation apps, which Raj says are a helpful starting point for clearing the mind, his sessions go much

► Fan base: a garden-view villa at Kamalaya



deeper. Two decades of living as a monk and a meditation teacher in India will do that.

"Meditation is ultimately strengthening our ability to self-inspect," he explains. "It allows us to pay attention to our emotions and not be a detached observer."

"Psychological suffering is hard to address – it's where meditation becomes important," he continues. "Step back and look at your mind and the stories you're weaving into it. Your future does not equal your past. Meditation can help you break that obsessive cycle."

It doesn't come easily, or naturally. But it does come. Slowly. For 20 minutes during every session, I am expertly guided by Raj to access the memories and feelings suppressed in my subconscious.

Unexpectedly – and I cannot stress how sceptical I felt taking on a programme such as this – for the first time in my life I understand what has been playing out in my head, and I notice that I don't look to the future fearfully, something that has never existed for me before. It's a seismic shift that feels unbelievably liberating and, most importantly, continues when I get home. I owe Raj so much.

Raj is right: my past suffering doesn't have to be my future reality. I shut the door on our last session with a very clear, very strong thought, and a cheesy line I really never thought I'd say: I choose to free myself. I choose to live my beautiful life.

Healing Holidays (020 3372 6945; healingholidays.com) offers a seven-night Embracing Change programme at Kamalaya Koh Samui from £3,849 per person sharing, including flights, transfers and full board accommodation. Follow-up sessions with Life Enhancement Mentors can be booked at kamalayaconnect.com

Covid rules Visitors must show proof of full vaccination, or a negative PCR test taken no more than 72 hours before departure, or proof of recovery. See fco.gov.uk for more information

THREE MORE LIFE-CHANGING RETREATS

Arrigo Programme, England

The Arrigo Programme's bespoke healing retreats are designed by the internationally acclaimed psychotherapist and healer Fiona Arrigo, and include Realising and Releasing the Power and Potential of the Mind, and the Grief Space. They take place in a Georgian rectory located in 17 acres of countryside in Somers. thearrigoprogramme.com

Mandali, Italy

Located an hour's drive from Milan, this 57-guest retreat overlooks Lake Orta with views across to the Swiss Alps. A range of retreats are available, from Silent to Breath Intensive, but the three-day Mandali experience, which focuses on yoga and meditation, is a gentle place to start. mandali.org

Strategic Space, France

This four-night Strategic Space retreat, which takes place in a medieval village in Burgundy, is designed to help business leaders and creative visionaries kick-start new chapters in work and personal life. It includes one-on-one sessions with narrative strategist Julie Hosler. thestrategicspace.com

'Go back to your room and shut the door,' she tells me. 'And if you want to cry, cry! If you want to shout, SHOUT!'