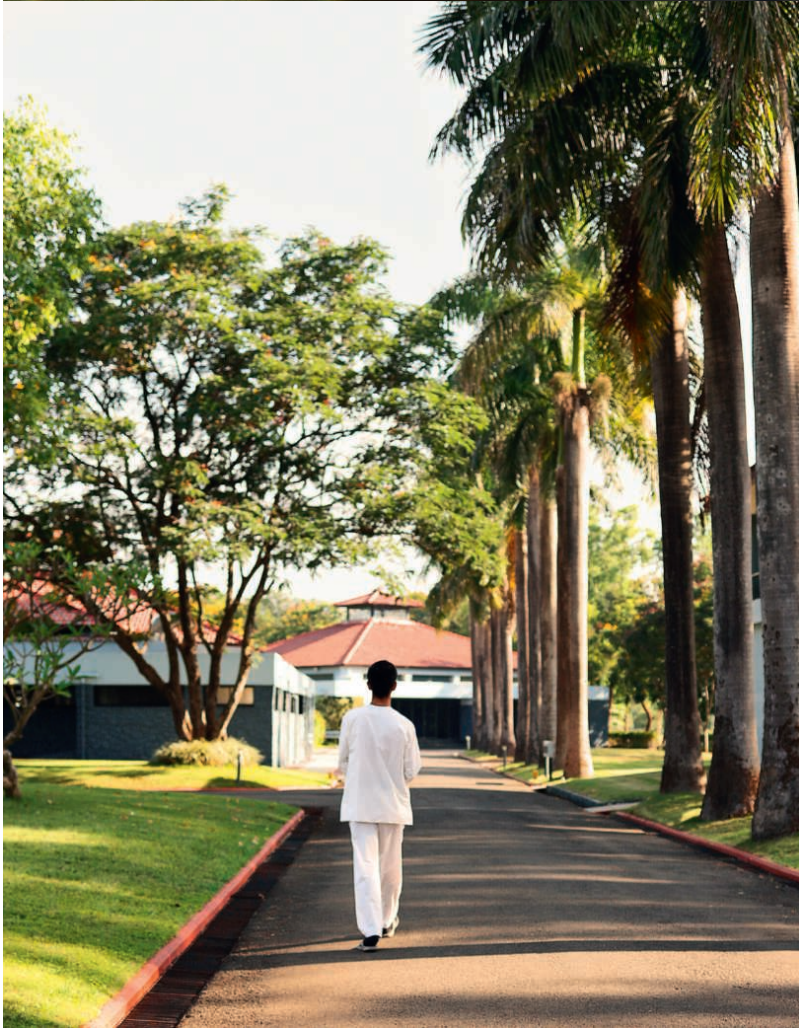




FOR WEEKS I FELT  
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# IN WITH THE OLD

ROCKED BY CHALLENGING LIFE EVENTS,  
DAISY FINER SIGNS UP AS AN ACOLYTE AT THE  
VEDANTA ACADEMY IN MAHARASHTRA

THE MOMENT HAD ARRIVED. After months of listening to the lectures and hanging on the words of the greatest living exponent of Vedanta, Indian philosopher A Parthasarathy, I had the honour of meeting him in person. The then 96-year-old Swamiji, as he is known, had suffered a fall and been moved from his beloved ashram, the Vedanta Academy, to his home in Pune. When called into his presence, I found a self-realised master sparkling with as much warmth as the Indian sun. I'd been told that, as soon as you walk in the room, he can see all your past lives. More than a few times, Swamiji asked me, "Where are you going next?" I understood "Mumbai" was not the answer he was looking for. At one point, he held my gaze for so long my heart nearly stood still. The transmission of kindness was overwhelming. For weeks I felt like I'd been lifted to a higher plane.

What a difference Vedanta can make. Last year, far from floating, I'd rarely felt lower. After a tsunami of heart-piercing betrayals, personal and professional, my self-esteem was shot. I cried almost every day. I thought about taking antidepressants but I didn't want to just plaster over the pain. However, feel it to heal it was exhausting. I knew I was responding to external events and that I needed to change my response patterns. Feeling desperate, I connected to the higher and pleaded for a miracle. Shortly afterwards, I decided to travel to India: the world's greatest treasure trove of spirituality, and the country that had long ago stolen my heart.

I first came across Vedanta at Ananda in the Himalayas, where twice-daily lectures offering wisdom for living are given by a rotation of alumni of the Vedanta Academy, and by every bed is a copy of Swamiji's *Vedanta Treatise: The Eternities*. Inspired by the sentence "Only the rare one who has directed his search inward has reached the state of supreme bliss," I learnt that Swamiji had given up a life of riches and Rolls-Royces to study India's scriptures, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, and decode them for a contemporary audience. His teachings offer a logical approach to the truths of life, encouraging seekers to remove egocentric desires, find their true Self and, as ➤





the Gita states, “raise yourself by yourself”. I signed up to Swamiji’s three-year online course dedicated to strengthening the intellect, and started to plan a visit to the Vedanta Academy.

Tucked away in the mango-scented environs of Malavli, the ashram is a three-hour drive southeast from Mumbai; I left the city early enough to arrive in time for breakfast. The dining room was packed with fresh-faced students, a mix of Indians and foreigners, peeling sweet oranges and enjoying a help-yourself vegetarian breakfast on communal tables – vegan options are always available and the lights are designed to minimise harm to insects. I soon realised that, just as Swamiji, with his elegant stature and lively gravitas, doesn’t resemble a guru from central casting, this was no sleepy, burning-incense sort of ashram. There are no pictures of Swamiji, no temple, no flower garlands. Instead, the grounds are planted with pretty trees, well-cut paths serve as running tracks and separate buildings are allocated to the dining room, office,

## QUESTIONS RANGED FROM “HOW DO YOU FORGIVE THE UNFORGIVABLE?” TO “HOW DO I KNOW IF MY MIND OR MY INTELLECT IS MAKING A DECISION?”

gym, lecture halls, Swamiji’s quarters and six blocks of accommodation. The setting is akin to a well-organised university campus. Interiors, stark and plain to “promote simple living and higher thinking”, are a welcome world apart from the ashrams of Rishikesh. I was relieved to discover that I didn’t have to sleep on a mattress on the floor. But I did manage to make my own bed and wash up my designated metal plate and cutlery – a character-building novelty for Indians with staff.

Running without a break since its inception, the rolling three-year residential course currently has 22 core students. Guests dip in as and when, as do former pupils, who migrate back to recharge. As I discovered on a five-night stay, days start as early as 4.25am with a Sanskrit prayer outside under the stars, followed by time for spiritual study. To begin with, I felt as if I had landed in a strange sci-fi movie, but I soon adapted. An early yoga class and evening bhajans are given by the students, who each contribute to the running of the ashram. “Life is to give not to take” is a benchmark of Vedanta, and I felt energetically embraced by everyone’s kindness. As one long-term resident Indian student put it, “Some people think that we are outsiders and label us as weirdos, but we are the definition of community.”

The spirit of the ashram may be convivial, but Vedanta is not an easy path. My experience, which also involves regular e-learning and online sessions at home, has revealed that, while the philosophy draws together every spiritual thread I’ve ever followed, to create a map to live by, it doesn’t provide a quick fix. The intense study demands that you travel deep, questioning everything, including your mental and emotional framework. Vedanta invites you to accept that the outer world is relative and illusionary; only the inner world offers the absolute truth. It takes time for this message to land, more time still to absorb and live it.

Morning lectures at the ashram, for which I sat barefoot and cross-legged on the floor, delved into topics I found revelatory but intense, such as *The Perfect Human* or *The Law of Karma*. Group discussions drew on insights not just from 5,000-year-old Indian texts, but from works by the likes of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo. Questions ranged from “How do you forgive the unforgivable?” to “How do I know if

my mind or my intellect is making a decision?” The methodical process of enquiry, and the repetition of concepts, can be frustrating if, like me, you prefer to sprint to the finish line. I left the ashram with new friends, uplifted but also aware that I am at the beginning of a challenging, probably lifelong, commitment.

While, obviously, perfection eludes me, Vedanta is helping me to feel less of a victim – of surface emotions and of circumstance. It’s astonishing how it has put a magnifying glass up to every aspect of my life. I’ve become more of a witness, in every moment, to my own behaviour. Absorbing the higher values of this ancient knowledge is enabling me to face change in a different way. A dear friend died recently. Rather than ripping up the wound of every lost loved one I’ve ever suffered, I was able to grieve without heading to Hades. Slowly, subtly and deep within me, a feeling of expansive inner peace is being nurtured. If a miracle is just a change in perspective, I believe the universe answered my call. **T**

*The Vedanta Academy offers biannual Life Decoded youth camps and a yearly International Retreat. Guests can also join resident students for a voluntary donation; vedantaworld.org*