

Embarking on The Legacy Retreat

It's an inward journey to rediscover and reconnect with your true self – a pilgrimage to mindfulness. The most valuable investment and true luxury you can have in this day and age is, after all, the living legacy to yourself and your loved ones, by going through an intense transformative process of epic proportions

Writer Johannes Pong



THIS PAGE: Enjoying an al fresco qigong lesson barefoot on the grass. OPPOSITE PAGE: The Bedroom Pool Villa invites guests to spend most of their time poolside

Zen during university in Japan, and now studying Vedanta under two remarkable teachers of Vedic philosophy), I realise that I lacked this fundamental awareness of such an intrinsic part of my psyche. And awestruck because I recognise instinctually that the Enneagram narrative taught by Volker and Jutka allows me to rediscover what was sorely missing – the essential self-knowledge to help me let go of ridiculous self-defeating behavioural patterns, heal wounds that I kept scratching and proceed with actual growth.

Being Enneagram-literate is to discover the hidden lock and key to bust out of your ego prison. For me, as a Four, when I am stressed out by chaos, I have to affirm life by reminding myself that it's perfectly OK to not be perfect and to feel immensely grateful with what I already have.

After dealing with our minds, it's time for our bodies. Before diving into personalised treatments, master acupuncturist Mark Phillips announces that he is going to give us an all-over acupuncture detox he dubs the 'Double Dragon'. Those who have no prior experience with the time-honoured Chinese healing tradition are a bit sceptical at first, but after the first session, all are sold. Most report feeling high, like on LSD!

In Chinese medicine, acupuncture is considered the most powerful and effective healing technique (before drugs), as needles positioned on various meridian points directly manipulate the body's energy flow. I'm familiar with its efficacy, as I have acupuncture parties with my dentist friend who's been taking TCM classes (the painstakingly but pain-free way she cleans my teeth makes me trust her implicitly with needles as well).

After just one session with Mark, with two rows of needles down my spine, I'm convinced of his expertise in this ancient art. Something visceral is happening here as I lie face down on the massage bed. I ask him to explain how acupunctural detox actually works. "I mean, are the toxins being flushed out?" I enquire. He pauses for a second, and says matter-of-factly, "The toxins just disappear." It's been years since I felt so light.

Mark gives me a more in-depth answer later. The needles cause slight inflammation on the skin – a crimson glow is a good sign – which gets internal organs to dump toxic cellular memories we've carried subconsciously for ages. The next acupuncture appointment is individually tailored with consultation. Since I lead a predominantly nocturnal lifestyle as a

usually review resorts and restaurants, not retreats. Upon reading The Legacy Retreat's website, I was immediately intrigued by the programme and the multidisciplinary credentials of the staff. I also really liked their line: "Bring your crisp consciousness to the present."

Plus, this time it was held at The Nam Hai, a gorgeous five-star resort situated in Central Vietnam, near the town of Hoi An, a UNESCO World Heritage Site I'd always wanted to visit. They had just completed one in the magical mountains of Paro, Bhutan, and the next Legacy edition will be at the eco-retreat Alila Villas Soori on the island of the gods, Bali, in November. Before embarking on the trip, I attended a media luncheon and met the effervescent founders of The Legacy Retreat, Mark and Crystal Leahy, as well as one of their

fabulous facilitators, the magnetic Jutka Freiman. "Well, I'm in your hands now," I remarked. "No. You're in your own hands now," Jutka replied.

DAY 1

Everyone is excited at the breakfast table and I'm excited by the delicious *Cao Lầu*, the signature noodle dish of this region. We head to a hall arranged for our group. After coffee and self-introductions, we get into the zone with a simple exercise of setting an intention – what we hope to get out of the next five days – by picking up three objects around the resort that represent our past, present and future.

The Legacy Retreat officially begins with the Enneagram – nine character types that describe motivation. These core personality types do not tell you how to live, or what

to believe. It merely explains why we are motivated to act like we do, how we basically fall into these compulsive patterns.

None of these personalities are good news. They're not something to be proud of, like being a Leo or a Libra, a dragon or a rabbit (that comes with strengths as well as weaknesses). The Enneagram numbers are basically nine designs of fortresses we've built for protection as children, according to our particular karmic sensitivities. These ego-structures become prisons that lock us in as adults, depriving us of our potential. It's the emotional child within you that not only threatens your well-being, but also that of your family as well. For instance, when Enneagram Ones get stressed, they become controlling and critical. When Twos freak out, they give – in hopes that others will give back – concurrently developing

erroneous pride in thinking that they know what others need ('mother knows best' syndrome). Threes will start performing like hyperactive monkeys, and Fours will be paralysed by self-doubt and ultimately fall into deep depression!

Apparently my Four-ness is pretty evident to Jutka (also a Four), who told Crystal right after our press lunch in Hong Kong, "I think Johannes is a Four..." Our archetypal disposition is motivated by romance – not romantic love – but art, fantasy and higher ideals. We're attracted to aesthetics and get stressed out by vulgarity, ugliness and mediocrity.

Once my archetype is determined, I am appalled and awestruck. Appalled because after a decade of yoga and a lifetime of cultivated spirituality (twenty years of Sunday school as a pastor's son, forays into





THIS PAGE: One of The Nam Hai's Bedroom Villas with a long bath. OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoy a good night's sleep in the king-sized bed

freelance writer, and knowing the basics of TCM, I ask Mark to save my liver and kidneys.

DAY 2

Early in the morning, we start our first qigong lesson barefoot on the grass, under the soothing shade of palm trees and the impossibly clear blue skies of rural Vietnam. It's an eminently different vibe practicing qigong grounded to Mother Earth, inhaling fresh, unpolluted air.

Qigong is a gentle but powerful and complete system of internal and external exercises, coupled with breath work. Mark's tradition is Jin Jing Gong – tendon/muscle; neuron/meridian channel exercise. It boosts immunity and prolongs life by nourishing natural biorhythms. It's also meditation in motion, quieting the mind, securing the

We are not role-playing; we're listening to our bodies and observing whatever emotions arise

way we feel and think, allowing deeper consciousness to surface. Even if you don't believe in what sounds like oriental hocus pocus, it undoubtedly increases blood circulation, even after a mellow workout.

Mark explains to us that qigong is an exercise in imagination; one has to 'imagine' grappling and circulating chi. The first time I did qigong as a kid, I felt like I was doing nothing. Now with an understanding

of yoga and more of an awareness of my physical vessel, I can palpably sense the chi flow around and within my being. I feel more alive and accomplished, with increased energy in both body and mind.

At the private acupuncture session afterwards, Mark tells me that he wishes that I would take up qigong as a regular practice, as it is my cultural heritage, and adds that I am 'a natural with the reversed breathing'. Indeed, the breath work is virtually effortless for me – almost like my innate way of inhaling and exhaling. It is a breath of fresh air (excuse the pun) doing qigong, not needing to strenuously control my breathing like I do for yogic pranayama.

On to the needles: besides fortifying my kidneys, the source of life-essence according to TCM (from a Western standpoint, kidneys regulate the electrolyte balance of sodium and potassium to promote the circulation of bioelectrical energy throughout our bodies), Mark decides that I need a bit of grounding as well to calm my overactive mind. He inserts a needle near my third eye – which is indeed relaxing – and two on both feet, between the big and second toe. I feel a very potent current of electricity shoot through my left leg for a split second. "Whoa," I holler. "Did you feel that? Good," Mark commends.

Upon hearing that I go to weekly Hindu philosophy classes, Mark suggests that I go meatless for the next few days. The Legacy Retreat is not The Farm and does not impose veganism (a sensible glass of alcohol is allowed if we so prefer). I don't take that into consideration because we're along the coast of Central Vietnam, and I want my seafood! For lunch, the therapists recommend that we spend it in solitude, with a spirit of inquiry. I savour my crispy prawn and pork *Bánh Xèo* in silence.

We finish learning about Enneagram types. Some prefer activities to lectures, but I thoroughly enjoy the teachings. Plus Jutka and Volker are a formidable storytelling team.

For dinner, we go out to ancient Hoi An, surreal in its crumbling, shabby splendour. Some of us have a drink in Q Bar, housed in the 200-year-old mansion of a Chinese merchant. We feel like we've been at the retreat for a week already, as it's been an intense two days.

DAY 3

So far so good. The Enneagram exposure is enlightening, the acupuncture amazing and qigong is slowly strengthening our life force. Out of the blue, the therapists drop Constellation Work on us. I presume it has something to do with horoscopes. Well, it has nothing to do with star signs.

"You have to suspend all disbelief and just go with it," Jutka informs us. Sometimes, you just have to drop your intellect and go with emotional intuition. "If your intellect were so smart, why would you still have all these problems?" So Constellation Work goes like this: Volker and Jutka open the floor for a brave soul to address a core issue (usually turns out to be a mommy or daddy issue). The subject then selects people to play pivotal

characters in their lives (usually mom, dad and other family members), or to represent symbolic elements of the issue itself (their fear, anger, sadness). The subject then places the 'actors' within the Constellation circle before he sits back down in silence. After letting the theatre unfold, with some Q&A from the facilitators, who are offering genuine security, trust, love and acceptance as well as keen psychological insight, a tremendous catharsis and emotional breakthrough is achieved for the subject. I kid you not.

We are not role-playing. We're listening to our bodies and observing whatever emotions arise, positioning ourselves in different poses and voicing out how it feels to be the person or the element represented. There is some sort of psychic channeling

going on, a downloading from the universal intelligence. For instance, when I am asked to be someone's childhood self, I am overcome with tiredness and just sit there. When I am called to be the personification of another's intellect, I'm filled with energy and curiosity, which fuels an insatiable desire to run around the room.

I won't go into detail, but basically the people, whom I've only met for two days, play my family and myself to a tee. That reveals hidden family dynamics to me and makes me hyperventilate. Every session ends with people crying, including the men. There is something compellingly cathartic when grown men cry in public.

All of us are drained from the experience, especially the three who are always called





THIS PAGE: Practising yoga on the beach; The Nam Hai's beautiful Pool Villas at dawn.
OPPOSITE PAGE: The lavish courtyard in front of the private Pool Villa at The Nam Hai

to act as pivotal roles. It's interesting to note that they are not the 'artistic, emotional, drama queen' type. Perhaps everyone subconsciously picks up on the fact that they will be excellent 'mediums' who won't contaminate therapy for the sake of theatrics!

During tea break, I confess to Mark Leahy that after witnessing the epic work going on, I am so shaken that I have no idea how to write this article anymore.

DAY 4

Constellation Work continues for the rest of the group. It is emotionally exhausting, terribly therapeutic, and decidedly life-changing for all involved.

Most of us have fallen ill, including me. From an Eastern, holistic point of view, we're all setting antiquated demons free, releasing deep-rooted negative patterns and mental blockages – now they're manifesting physically. From a Western perspective, we've all caught Volker's cold.

We have a group poolside dinner together in the private villa and we reveal bits and pieces of each other's lives, which astonish us all pleasantly, as we haven't really had the time to share those aspects of ourselves, although we all know enough of each other's crazy Enneagram patterns and insane family drama! We end the night with a DJ and a dance. I haven't had a lick of alcohol and I am slightly surprised that I enjoy dancing in public completely sober. I feel so buoyant. I wonder how much baggage I have let go of in just four days.

LAST DAY

I miss morning qigong to get an extra hour of rest. When I get to Mark's villa for my private consultation, he remarks on my strengthened kidney energies, despite my cold, after taking my pulse. We meditate together; he corrects my 'Nine Oxen' pose, and decides to open up my heart chakra. He stresses that it's necessary for me to ground myself. So there is more acupuncture for grounding. No palpable electric shock this time, though.

After lunch, we get ready to say our farewells, and we are asked to voice what we've appreciated in each other during the past five days. It's nice giving out lavish

compliments, as most of us are conditioned to be stingy with love in our everyday lives. What moves me to the point of tears is when a guy tells me that he appreciates "the exuberance, humour and joy" that I bring, as well as "the light heartedness, the creativity and the depth that lies beneath." The fact that people keep appreciating me being "loving and giving" surprises me most pleasantly.

Not that I am not aware of the love that I'm capable of giving, but I have thought that I had not allowed myself to give fully and freely due to the harshness of society. I did not believe that part of me had died, not forever, but at least it was dormant and not visible. Clearly that isn't the case, as others have witnessed it, and commented on it!

I'm sure everyone feels triumphantly transformed, but as it says in the aftercare manual we got from Crystal on graduation day: "This is just the beginning of your journey to self-discovery."

Thank you Legacy team for creating this sacred space and serving up some realness, love, trust and guidance within it!

www.thelegacyretreat.com

