

## Ghee Washing in a Charleston Jungle Megha Ralapati

Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts' residency is an incredibly unique opportunity for artists, researchers, curators and others to nurture the connections within their own art practices to the wealth of spiritual wisdom that abounds across our cultures. For the past two years, I've been deepening my own research into the ancient texts and transliterations of the Vedas, sacred Hindu scriptures, as I look for ancient antidotes to some of the maladies that shape contemporary culture. It seems to me that we don't always need to create new ideas and that, in fact, there is so much wisdom that has preceded us, some of it overlapping and intertwined across cultural and geographic context, that we can access and tap into deeply if we choose. FSA's growing library of publications, old and recent, about art and spirituality and the intersection of the two, provided a fruitful space for me to explore freely, forging new threads for myself.

Another favorite spot was walking through and reflecting inside the beautiful garden on the FSA site, which really feels like a jungle of vibrant palmettos and ferns, with a constant soundscape of birdsong and humming insects. The highlight of my residency was taking the opportunity to test out an embodied meditation I had been wanting to experiment with for a number of years. The Ayurvedic practice of *shata dhauta ghrita* is an endurance process all about transformation – inner and outer. To begin, I took an amount of cooking ghee (clarified butter), which even in its regular form has many benefits to the skin and hair due to its high number of vitamins and antioxidants. Once it has been transformed through the process of “ghee washing,” it supposedly becomes even more powerful, with expanded healing properties.

Using a steel thattu (plate) and a copper lota (vessel), I proceeded to “wash” the ghee by adding about ¼ cup of water at a time to the plate and mixing the ghee 10 circles to the right, then another 10 circles to the left, followed by disposing the water. Breath in, breath out. Then comes another pour of water. Washing again, 10 circles to the right and 10 to the left, followed by disposal of water. And breath. The term *shah dhauta ghrita* is a Sanskrit term meaning *100 times washed ghee* and once completed (as in 100 washes, each consisting of 10 rotations in each direction) it transforms the substance into a light-weight, hydrating and supposedly magical balm for skin, which is said to heal any and all minor skin ailments. When performed under the light of a full moon, benefits increase tenfold!

For me, performing this Ayurvedic ritual in our little urban jungle, while the other residents and community members sat with me, helped me keep count, documented the process, and reminded me to take a seat when I was tired, changed an otherwise solitary experience into a surprisingly joyful and communal one. The process was quite physical and took a couple of hours. I tried to align my breathing with each wash and alternate hands when possible, inviting the notion of meditation as integrated within daily activities, as opposed to being a separate, rarified experience. My exploration will continue and my questions are: what does it take to make change? What is the pain inherent in transformation? How can we enact alchemy in our inner worlds while living within impossibly externalized realities?