

# **Seminar: Community, Health and Universality**

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### **Health**

(in the Context of Community and Universality)

by Robert Moore

I think it can be fairly asserted that health is a universal value of the human community. Almost all human beings value being and feeling healthy. In the contemporary world, not only do we have a World Health Organization, but four out of the eight 2015 U.N. Millennium Developmental Goals focus on factors of health: to eradicate poverty and hunger, to improve maternal health, to reduce infant mortality and to combat AIDS, malaria and other diseases. If we include the mental and psychological aspects of health, then the Millennium goals of environmental sustainability, gender equality and universal primary education are relevant to the overall health of humanity.

The Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> B.C.E., gives an instructive view of health. In the chapter on Happiness it states that “health is the greatest acquisition; contentment the greatest wealth.” There are two aspects of this teaching worth noting. One is that health is an “acquisition,” it is an acquired virtue. Heredity is an important factor in that acquisition, but so is learning to live a healthy lifestyle. In this conception health is visualized as something to be continually striven after by ourselves considered as agents responsible for our health.

The other aspect of this teaching is the significance of “contentment” as the greatest wealth. Physical health alone will not bring happiness and fulfillment. The examples of

healthy human specimens who eliminate the body by some suicidal means are far too numerous for any community to ignore. There are even more examples of people with significant physical disabilities and ailments who maintain a positive and happy attitude of mind. These reflections merely highlight what people learn from their own experience, that is, that physical health cannot be separated from mental and psychological wellbeing. Throughout the ages philosophers and mystics have asserted that spiritual wellbeing is ultimately the critical factor to be considered in relation to health.

In a paper delivered in 1951 to the Indian Institute of World Culture, Dr. Bernard Phillips noted that a psychosomatic emphasis in medicine has two important corollaries:

“If the condition of the personality is recognized as a crucial factor in health and disease, then we shall have to admit that education, which in the broadest sense is the shaping of personality, is a form of preventive medicine. What goes into the mind is, in the long run, of as great importance as what goes into the body, and the building up of a sound sense of values is as important to the individual’s health as the building up of strong bones and muscles. Man acts in accordance with the conceptions of his own nature which he entertains and a man’s philosophy must count as a factor relevant to his health.”  
(p.15)

Contemporary scientific research has validated the reciprocal relationship between physical and mental/emotional health. The discovery and description of the physiological mechanisms involved in this reciprocal relationship began with the work of Hans Selye in the 1950’s. Dr. Selye worked on understanding our body’s response to stress, especially on understanding the problem of sustained

low-level stress so common in Western societies. The central mechanism in the psychosomatic interaction is the Neuroendocrine cell. Neuroendocrine cells are nerve cells that release hormones instead of the neurotransmitters that most nerve cells release. It is through these cells that an integration between the nervous system and the endocrine system is accomplished. A major part of the neuroendocrine system that controls reactions to stress and regulates many body processes, including digestion, the immune system, mood and emotions, sexuality, and energy storage and expenditure, is the HPA axis, that is to say, the **hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis) or the limbic-hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (LHPA axis)**. The HPA axis works in this way: Corticotropin-releasing hormone is the neurohormone that is secreted by the hypothalamus during a stress response. This in turn stimulates the anterior lobe of the pituitary gland causing the anterior pituitary to release adrenocorticotrophic hormone into the blood circulation. The Adrenocorticotrophic hormone stimulates the adrenal gland to release cortisol. Cortisol increases fat and protein metabolism, increases blood sugar, and decreased the body's immune response.

To some extent the challenges of stress are a necessary component to health. The body's physiological response to stress is its attempt to maintain a complicated balance or equilibrium, technically known as homeostasis. Everything in our bodies works within certain defined parameters. Our blood pressure, blood sugar, and blood cholesterol – in fact all the lab values that are recorded from blood analysis – have a normal range, and abnormal values are outside that range. For instance, the normal range for fasting blood sugar is 70 to 100mg. Values above 100mg indicate a diabetic trend. Even to maintain our posture requires a balance of facilitatory and inhibitory impulses from the cerebral motor cortex through

the basal ganglia and spinal cord to our muscles. An imbalance in these impulse results in either spastic or flaccid muscles. Excessive emotional tension usually results in increased muscle tension. With every thought, every feeling, every movement and every environment the body is required to make adjustment to maintain its homeostasis.

Homeostatic mechanisms are dependent upon and respond to our physical environment. The air we breath gives us the oxygen needed to burn the food we eat that provides us with the energy we use to live. How often do we notice it? We may feel independent, but as physical beings we are in constant need of the resources of the earth –food, water and air. There is this constant exchange going on between humanity and the other life forms of the Earth. From the standpoint of health in relation to the Earth, the question is whether we can manage an appropriate balance with our environment comparable to the homeostatic mechanisms in the human body? How is it possible for human beings to be healthy when their vital resources, i.e., food, water and air, are poisoned and polluted? If our resources are polluted, what does that say about our thinking, feeling and lifestyles? Do we recognize and attempt to maintain the healthy parameters set by the laws of nature, which are expressions of the law of interdependence and harmony.

“We will do well not to forget that the etymological connection between ‘whole’, ‘wholesome’, ‘holy’ and ‘healthy’ is significant of a deep essential relationship and that ‘healing’ means literally ‘restoring to wholeness’. (p.10)

“This divine discipline, Arjuna, is not to be attained by the man who eateth more than enough or too little, nor by him who hath a habit of sleeping much, nor by him who is given to

overwatching. The meditation which destroyeth pain is produced in him who is moderate in eating and in recreation, of moderate exertion in his actions, and regulated in sleeping and waking.” (Bhagavad Gita, ch. 6)

“Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish.” (Confucian teaching on the *Doctrine of the Mean*)

“Become the model for the world. Being the model for the world, One will never deviate from virtue.” (i.e., health) (Tao Te Ching)

In age-old practices like Ayurvedic medicine, Chinese medicine, and even in Homeopathic medicine, the human being could not be studied apart from the whole of Nature because all the elements of the human being are bound up with all the elements of Nature. The overarching principle of the whole universe was and is the law of harmony. Harmony and health are synonymous, and there can be no realistic conception of health apart from a consideration of the harmonious interaction between all aspects of the human being in relation to himself, to the community, and to nature.

Probing the connection of harmony and health, one could ask questions like:

Is a person healthy if they cannot follow a simple logical argument? Is a philanthropist healthy if his wealth was acquired by means that were harmful to people or polluted the environment?

Is a city manager healthy if the water he supplies to the city’s residents is toxic?

Is humanity healthy if their lifestyle creates an accelerating rate of mass extinction of other species?

Ayurveda is translated as the science or wisdom of living. As in the questions raised here, it is always possible to question the wisdom of living a particular lifestyle. Lifestyles develop out of what we consider valuable in our lives, and those values are formed, either consciously or unconsciously, from our philosophical perspective.

In the words of Dr. Bernard Phillips:

“Man acts in accordance with the conceptions of his own nature which he entertains and a man’s philosophy must count as a factor relevant to his health.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson articulates a similar idea in his essay on “Circles”:

“The key to every man is his thought. Sturdy and defying though he look, he has a helm which he obeys, which is the idea after which all his facts are classified. He can only be reformed (in the context of this presentation, ‘he can only be healed’) by showing him a new idea which commands his own.”

Our values arise out of what we think it means to be human and what we think is real. A person’s treatment of his or her self and other living beings will flow out from what he or she actually believes to be true. For example, as a thought experiment, imagine a person who believes in reincarnation and karma. This means that he believes he will continually return to earth in a new body and new circumstances that are the direct result of his actions in this and past lives. Karma means action and the appropriate reaction, or as biblically formulated, ‘as ye sow, so shall ye reap’. But no one acts alone.

Each person acts within a community and has established relationships with a host of other people and with the environment in which he lives. Through karma, the law of cause and effect, people are bound together, so they are born again together, all with new bodies and personalities, but also with the consequences of their individual and collective actions in the past. They will suffer and enjoy together in direct proportion to the harmonious relationships they have, or have not established. In this view one can understand the vital importance of learning and applying the science of life. One cannot escape from problems humanity or the impact of humanity on the greater life of which it is a part. If a community ruins the world in which they live, and the members habitually harm each other, in this view, they will only increase disharmony and dis-ease, and they will suffering over and over again until they learn the laws of life – the laws of harmony.

This thought experiment, as simplistically presented here, demonstrates how philosophic views influence our values and our behavior. This is just one of many of the perspectives on life held by the human race. I chose this one because I think it is worthy of consideration in respect to the topic of Community, Health and Universality. But whatever the philosophic view, the question is, can it lead to a healthy life if it does not help us understand our responsibility for ourselves and for our world?

Emerson gives a key to changing the whole, or health as it were, of any culture:

“Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions. Let us rise into another idea: they will disappear.”

This is true as long as we understand that an “idea” in this context is like a vision of reality; it is inclusive of thought, will and feeling. Health cannot be separated from healthy ideas. The idea of harmony, of homeostasis - balance and proportion, is perhaps the central idea to a realistic conception of health.

In his essay on “Philosophy and Medicine” Dr. Bernard Phillips lists six ideas that he believes are critical elements to a harmonious or integral philosophy of medicine:

- 1) An adequate system of medicine will not merely be a Science of Medicine. It will be Ayurveda – literally, a wisdom of life. It will base itself on man in his organic wholeness.
- 2) A system of Medicine that deals with man in his wholeness will be ever mindful of the multi-dimensionality of human life.
- 3) An adequate system of Medicine will be one that tries to cooperate with Nature, not one that tries to outsmart Nature. (It should be recognized that Nature is the healing agent and that the doctor is Nature’s assistant and not her master.)
- 4) An integral Medicine will recognize that it is at least as much an art as a science and that healing is a relationship between two living personalities. (It is not merely a matter of proper ‘bedside manner’ . . .rather, it has to do with the limits of his knowledge, his self-knowledge, and the depth of his perception in grasping the whole human being.)
- 5) An adequate system of Medicine will be more concerned with *agents* than with *patients*, and will constantly seek to eliminate from the mind that passivity which in



etymology, as well as generally in fact, is connected with being a 'patient'.

- 6) I would submit for your consideration the thesis that it is the genuine mystic alone who is fully active and who has the capacity for realizing integral health. I would define the mystic as he who has made contact with that which is ultimately real and who has thereby achieved the goal of the philosopher's quest. He is perfectly integrated because he is integrated on every level.