

Globalisation of Ayurvedic massage

Psychiatry treats mental illness through biochemical manipulation. Psychoanalysis and psychology focus on developmental factors, personality structures and social relationships. The social sciences highlight social hierarchies and the stress caused by major socio-economic changes. Various modern healing disciplines have differing opinions about the mind and mental problems – each emphasizing biological, psychological, and social factors – and each drawing their own particular line between body and mind. This article takes a brief look at the Ayurvedic theory of the mind and shows how it could explain contemporary trends in health behaviour.

V. Sujatha



Ayurvedic theory of the mind

Samkhya philosophy, one of India's six classical philosophies on which Ayurveda draws, suggests that *manas* – of which the English word 'mind' is a rough equivalent – is a subtle form of matter. Three characteristics of *manas*, discussed in Ayurvedic texts, show that the mind is a function rather than an organ, and an entity that is connected to organ systems. Such a diffuse view of mind allows Ayurveda to accommodate personality and social factors in its theory of body metabolism,

though the psychological and social factors may not be set out in detail. Firstly, *manas* is inert and inactive till it is roused into action by impulses coming from the sensory apparatus. *Buddhi* [intellect] is the mental faculty that judges sensory inputs through comparison and memory. But the experience of cognition is only complete when the *atma* [soul] becomes involved too. If any of the components of the chain, namely, senses-mind-intellect-soul, are disconnected, cognition becomes impossible. So mind is that faculty that receives sensory inputs and facilitates the transformation of sensory inputs into knowledge. Secondly, mind is connected to the sensory organs, but unlike the sensory apparatus (namely, eye, ear, nose, mouth and skin) it is not represented by a specific organ. In the Ayurvedic perspective mind is therefore not part of the sensory apparatus, though it is dependent on them for carrying out its functions.¹ The understanding of mind as an intermediary faculty between the sensory apparatus on the one hand and the intellect and the soul on the other, suggests a 'continuum' between body and mind, rather than a dichotomy. Thirdly, despite the definition of mind as a function rather than an organ, Ayurveda explains that one of the seven bodily tissues referred to as *mastishka* [brain] is the seat of *gnanendriyas* [sensory-cognitive organs] and *karmendriyas* [action organs] and that it receives nourishment from food intake. Hence in the Ayurvedic view, organs that are gross and physical [*bhautika*] may have non-physical or abstract [*abhautika*] effects, and the mind is one such a subtle entity. It is not a mere property of the brain, nor is it located only in the brain.

According to the Ayurvedic theory, aberrations or morbid factors called *doshas*, are the primary cause of diseases. A dosha can be defined as an alteration in various bodily parameters triggered by changes in metabolism, namely, the process of digestion and distribution of food essence to various tissues, conditioned by a combination of gross factors, like food, and subtle factors, like stress and anxiety. Hence, the excessive consumption of unwholesome food could cause psychological problems and the excessive indulgence in mental activities, like calculation, may aggravate bodily symptoms. Further in the Ayurvedic framework, body and mind could be simultaneously affected by endogenous and exogenous events, and the one is not deemed more basic or foundational than the other. Excessive use of one particular sensory faculty could vitiate both somatic and mental doshas, for example, excessive television/monitor viewing. Disturbance of doshas through metabolic disorders could cause emotional disturbances that could trigger further problems in metabolism. Thinking of the body and mind as a continuum, characterised by simultaneity, enables Ayurveda to incorporate the relevance of psycho-social stress into its theory of disease causation. Interestingly, this Ayurvedic view is also seen in other Asian healing traditions.

Somatic treatment of mental problems

Research on healing traditions in Asia and their approach to psychosocial problems and studies from cross-cultural psychiatry find that there is a tendency among Asian patients approaching healers to present somatic or bodily symptoms in detail even when they face mental problems. In his ethnographic account of patients of a Sinhalese Ayurvedic practitioner the medical anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere describes how a twenty year old youth, the eldest in a family of seven siblings, complained of burning sensations in the stomach, pain in shoulders and back, and anxiety.² His mother, who accompanied him during the consultation, mentioned her son's extreme rage against his parents and outsiders. The Ayurvedic physician attributed the onset of the young man's symptoms to a severe episode of diarrhoea. While the anthropologist interpreted the cause of the young man's aggression to hostility towards a daunting father and the absence of heterosexual outlets, the Ayurvedic physician saw familial conflict as a symptom and not as the cause of the disease which he interpreted as '*rakta pitta*' [lit. blood affected by vitiated bile] and translated it to the English as hysteria. After a sermon on respect for parents, the physician administered emetics to cleanse the bowels along with drugs and dietary prescriptions to correct the disturbed *pitta* [bile]. In his analysis of this medical encounter Obeyesekere commented on the absence of psychodynamics in the Ayurvedic cosmology where psychological problems are attributed to physiological dysfunctions.

This tendency to somatise psychosocial problems seems to have permeated popular understanding of mental ailments in the Indian subcontinent. This is confirmed by Kleinman³ through cross-cultural studies in psychiatry, comparing China and North America. Asian patients were found to narrate bodily symptoms like pain, indigestion, giddiness, loss of appetite, constipation and so on, when they suffer from psychosomatic ailments. Arthur Kleinman – psychiatrist turned medical anthropologist – finds this to be in sharp contrast to his North American patients who possess a rich vocabulary

for expressing mental states like fear, grief, sadness, anxiety. They clearly separate these mental states from bodily symptoms. Medical practices in China also endorse the tendency to somatise psychic ailments. Here the focus is on physiological symptoms while psychological symptoms are taken care of in religious rituals, instead of counselling or psychotherapy, as is often the case in the West. Studies report that emetics, purgatives, dietary restrictions and external applications are often used by traditional physicians to treat ailments that are accompanied by what are regarded as 'mental' or 'psychological' problems such as worry, anxiety, agitation, anger and sadness and so on.

Ayurveda in the global health market

Despite the widespread availability of counselling services, there is a burgeoning demand for alternative therapies offering body care for a host of psychosomatic illnesses in the global north. Medical pluralism, or the possibility of choice of systems of therapy in medical treatment, has become the reality in the health market the world over. Of specific interest to us is the growing demand for various body-based methods like massages, medical oil applications, douches and fomentations. In the global Spa industry patients and clients receive Indian medical applications such as body massages. *Pancakarma* treatment [five actions on the body] that consists of techniques like purgation, sudation, oil applications, accompanied by dietary regulations, constitute the bulk of what passes off as Ayurvedic medicine in the elite Maharishi Ayurveda centres in Europe and the US.⁴ However, this shift from mind-centred techniques, such as meditation, to somatic practices is quite recent.

The holistic health movement in the West started sometime in the late sixties. From the 1960s onwards the disillusion with corporate lifestyle and crass materialism propelled a search for alternative philosophies of life. Eastern mysticism came into the limelight. Counter cultures like the hippie movement embraced meditation and adopted spiritual gurus. But it was not until the eighties that the focus shifted from mysticism and meditation for the alienated mind, to care of the body. It is well known that varieties of body massages are much more popular in the alternative healthcare facilities than sheer meditation. Spiritual discourses no longer attract many clients. This is also evident from the fact that, since the 1990s, in India itself post liberal spiritual gurus have added Ayurveda as an essential element in their package of spiritual commodities. A case in point is Sri Sri Ravi Shankar who has a large ashram near the South Indian metropolis of Bangalore which caters to well-to-do Indians.

My point is that the body is increasingly becoming central to healing practices meant to address emotional problems like stress, anxiety, loss and depression and a host of other psychosomatic problems. It is also important to note that there is a shift in the content of mystical discourses as well. Early on they spoke of freedom from worldly bondages, now they speak of freedom from stress in order to fit well into the needs of contemporary work culture. The popularity of body-based therapies like *pancakarma*, massage, yoga and new diet regimes in the global North, reflects a need for somatic interventions as a means of handling problems of the mind.

The somatisation of psychological and socio-economic problems by non-elite (Asian) populations is also an exemplification of the same Ayurvedic theory of the continuity of body and mind. Working on the body could certainly be a way of working on the mind – this seems to be the idea behind yoga as well. Studies on body and subjectivity in the Asian martial arts also highlight a special relation between the mind and body, cultivated through body discipline indicating the significance of a body-mind continuum. This article is an invitation to consider that, according to the Ayurvedic understanding, bodily intervention for psycho-social stress is not a culture specific trait of the Asian people, but a fact borne out in the spread of body care therapies in late capitalist societies as well.

V. Sujatha, Center for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (vsujatha011@gmail.com)

Notes

- 1 Gupta, S.P. 2009. *Psychopathology in Indian medicine*. Delhi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan
- 2 Obeyesekere, G. 1977. 'The Theory and Practice of Psychological Medicine in the Ayurvedic Tradition', *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 1:155-181
- 3 Kleinman, A. 1980. *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- 4 Zimmermann, F. 1993. 'Gentle Purge: The flower power of Ayurveda', in Charles Leslie & Allan Young (eds.) *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, pp.209-223