

VEDANTA AND HEALTH Swami Bodhananda

Gone are the days when health was understood merely in terms of physical wellbeing. As our experience of humanity deepens, individual being is seen as a complex and composite entity made up of the body, mind and spirit interacting with the society and environment and co-creating moment to moment realities. From such a conception of the individual, health is defined as self-abidance and mind-body balance resulting in integrated, interactive, creative living.

The focus of this seminar, "Vedanta, Yoga and Ayurveda" is health and wellbeing. Vedanta deals with the spiritual dimension of persons, while Yoga deals with the mental and Ayurveda with the physical. In fact body, mind and spirit are interdependent dimensions. Body is the vehicle of the mind and mind is the vehicle of the spirit. A healthy body manifests the powers of the mind and a balanced mind invokes the splendour of the spirit. Ayurveda is the first step, Yoga the next and Vedanta the last step in a person's fulsome growth and flourishing.

A person cannot recover his/her full health without Yoga practice and contemplation on the luminous self. Medical interventions, especially from the allopathic perspective, whether in chronic, acute or catastrophic conditions, are only superficial and palliative in nature. Such treatments deal with only symptoms and not with the deeper causes. The root cause of illnesses or psycho-somatic disorders are in the mind or in still subtler dimensions. Bacteria, viruses or germs affect only weak people whose minds are disturbed and immunity low. Moreover most of the illnesses like cancer, blood pressure, diabetes and cardio-vascular failures are results of fast faced valueless modern living. Traditional wisdom says that illnesses have their origin in wrong beliefs, attitudes and life styles, in spiritual alienation and lack of higher purposes in life.

Physical health is no guarantee for mental health. Even physically robust people can suffer from depression, paranoia, phobias and a variety of other psychic disorders. Physical hulks with rippling muscles need not be mentally stable, intellectually alert or socially integrated. Though physical and mental health is mutually related and supportive, they are different values and need different strategies and protocols to be promoted and sustained. Yet they are bidirectional. Right diet, exercises, leisure and work schedule promote physical health; value based life, positive attitudes and friendly nature enhance mental health; and faith in the goodness and in the spiritual rootedness of humanity will nurture spiritual health. It is difficult to emphasize one aspect of health over the other. In fact it is prudent to have a holistic approach in matters of health.

'Svaasthyam' the Ayurveda word for health is very suggestive. Epistemologically the word means 'self-abidance'. To live in touch with ones spiritual source is the true experience of health. Self-abidance requires equanimity of mind and physical fitness. All Upanishads begin with a prayer for firm limbs and a strong body.

A large volume of recent research findings support the ancient belief that meditation, prayer and selfless work not only cure serious illnesses but also nurture sustainable health. To be healthy is considered to be holy and to be near to God. Modern spiritual thought has replaced the idea of 'god experience' with 'holistic health experience'. To put it succinctly: health is God, health is love, and health is oneness and wholeness.

It is also understood by modern medical professionals that physical health cannot be sustained without positive lifestyle changes and value systems. The approach to health is increasingly becoming qualitative than quantitative, subjective than objective, a matter of perspectives than prescriptions.

What is the role of Vedanta, Yoga and Ayurveda in the current health scene in America? The American health agenda is to ensure affordable, quality and prompt health care for all citizens. These are precisely the goals that modern allopathic system of cure and medical establishment find increasingly difficult to accomplish. The medical costs are sky-rocketing, treatment quality is decreasing, and delays in reaching needy patients increasing. Policy planners are predicting an impending catastrophe in the American medical field.

There are basically three causes that brought us to this predicament. First is the faulty shallow understanding of the origin of illnesses; second the assumption that mind has no role in creating and maintaining health; and third that suppression through medicine is the best way to cure illnesses. These notions make individual abdicate their personal discipline and responsibility and increasingly depend on the physician and the system for their health. This attitude makes individuals neglect the cultivation of their minds and as a result violent, selfish, greedy and negative thoughts are allowed to pollute the body politic. The suppression of illness, though gives temporary cure, only causes side effects and further complications.

The allopathic system of cure, in spite of its contribution in advancing general health and longevity of the community, has come to a dead end and into a vicious cycle. The medical community is now looking for alternate and complimentary systems of diagnosis and cure to supplement allopathic system. Vedanta, Yoga and Ayurveda system of thought, discipline and cure is a welcome departure from the body centred materialist approach and offer wholesome solutions for the present health problems.

Vedanta is the quintessential teaching of the Vedic tradition of India. It espouses the philosophy that the world and the creatures in the world are manifestations of the same spirit—Brahman. This Brahman is pure timeless consciousness and can be realized as identical with the self in the individual. This realization is possible through a process of listening to the scriptures, reflecting on their implied meaning, and finally experiencing the oneness with Brahman in every thought and action. Brahman being the ultimate source is the creator of atoms, molecules, tissues, organs and organisms. The same Brahman is the creator of the stars, planets, forests and water bodies. In a moment of enlightened ecstasy, the Vedanta master declares that the entire universe is a dance of consciousness and hence is alive and kicking. The knower of Brahman becomes a co-creator with Brahman—his/her thoughts and wishes become channels for Brahman's expression as material realities. Matter configurations are congealed consciousness. Individuals being basically spirits have the power to wish, will and manifest health. Intentional thought can modify consciousness into energy, immunity, new cells and neurons. There was a time when medical community used to believe that we are born with a fixed number of neurons and that generation of new neurons were not possible. But that theory is debunked and the current belief is that brain has the power of regeneration.

Thus Vedanta gives the foundation for the new science of health. That health is the quality of the spirit and also that health can be willed and realized on the mental and physical plain by a spiritually rooted person. Alienated from the nourishing spirit, the mind wilts and the body disintegrates like even an uprooted tree. So, the first step in the recovery of health is the firm belief in the spiritual nature of the person. Such belief and the resultant integral

vision of the world cause a cognitive revolution in the psyche of the individual. S/he sees him/herself as basically healthy. Health is not to be acquired from outside, but to be invoked from inside. This insight relieves the person from all kinds of worries and hypochondriac tendencies. Ninety per cent of cure is achieved by this change in self-perception.

Brahman of Vedanta is sat-cit-ananda. One who realizes Brahman knows him/herself to be blissful consciousness in the midst of the ever changing stimulus-response flow of life. A happy person is healthy person. Awareness is the secret of happiness. Awareness of thoughts and actions deepens self experience and awakens health.

The Vedanta view of the individual is the basis of Yoga practice meant to discipline mind and body. Yoga begins with body exercises and then move on to the practice of balanced deep breathing followed by concentration techniques. Concentration on the luminous self liberates the soul from the entanglements of the body and establishes it in its own glory. Both Vedanta and Yoga agree on the nature of the self as eternal consciousness bliss. While Vedanta further maintains that the self is infinite and all inclusive, Yoga views self as finite and discrete. But the difference is more semantic and doctrinal in nature and has no bearing on the practices and final experience. The many practices developed in Yoga such as 'Ashtanga Yoga', 'Kriya Yoga' and 'Samadhi Yoga' along with various Asanas (physical postures) have contributed immensely to not only Vedanta praxis but also to Ayurveda treatments.

The great contribution of Yoga is in the field of mind and its influence on the body and health. Yoga helps not only in maintaining health but also in realizing the full potential of the body-mind complex. The pranayama techniques developed by Yoga have enabled the practitioner to clean up subtle energy channels and deepen self awareness. Yoga is the practical aspect of Vedanta, the end object being a serene and balanced mind, unshakable even in the face of extreme provocations. Patanjali, the supreme exponent of Yoga, defines Yoga as "restraining thought modifications." He further clarifies that restraint is achieved by watching the flow of mind in interactive contexts and letting the mind function without fear. A restrained mind is self aware, blissful, loving and healthy.

Ayurveda is a system of diagnosis and cure based on Vedanta philosophy and yoga practices. The theory of *doshas* (vata, pitta and kapha), the principle of *panchabhutas* (akasa, vayu, agni, apa and prthvi) and *sapta dhatus* (skin, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen/egg) define Ayurveda's understanding of the individual. The detached self is the centre of this universe. The uniqueness in Ayurveda is the 'dosha' theory of disease and health. Doshas are basic constituents of the body that determine its structure, properties and functions. Doshas are three—vaata, pitta and kapha. Accordingly individuals are classified into three types—active/light built, passionate/medium built and passive/large built. Treatment which consists of dietary discipline, mantra chanting, meditation, massages, charity work, panchakarma kriyas and herbal potions are meant to regain balance of doshas in the body. Balance is the golden principle shared by all Eastern cultures in all their pursuits, be it spiritual or secular.

Thus we find a continuity of thought in Vedanta, Yoga and Ayurveda. Vedanta is concerned with the balance of lakshanas, the indicative qualities of Brahman which is sat, cit and ananda. A right balancing of fearlessness, awareness and joy leads to true freedom or moksha. The same ideal is pursued in Yoga by balancing the play of three gunas (satva, rajas and tamas) and restraining the violent modifications of mind leading to Samadhi or the bliss of self abidance. Ayurveda, following the same line of thought, aims at balancing the doshas and invoking health or svaasthyam/self-abidance.

The allopathic system of cure based on a mechanistic conception of the individual, external interventions, antibiotics and suppression of symptoms, no doubt, is a major improvement from most of the ancient practices based on superstitious beliefs, magical formulae and incantations. But the problem with the linear thinking of allopathic system, that more of the same delivers more value, is that it loses balance and proportion, the golden rule of wisdom, and deteriorates into mere habits and mindless chores. What is required is a happy balance between mainstream allopathic practices ably complimented by alternate systems of treatments long practiced in India, China, Africa and South America. Finally every individual has to take responsibility for his health and longevity by developing a holistic view of life and death, spirit and matter, and health and disease. This will lead to self-discipline and self-realization and flourishing of the total person.

Health is the self-experience of a self-realized person.

By
Swami Bodhananda.