

Being Mindful – Towards Spiritual Healing

Sangeetha Menon

National Institute of Advanced Studies
Indian Institute of Science campus
Bangalore 56 012

Give Citation:

Menon, S. 2005, *Heal Thy Spirit*, Heritage Amruth, Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions, Vol1. Issue 1, (April 2005) pp 38-40

There is a story in Chandogya Upanishad. The representatives of three classes of beings – the humans, the demons and demi-gods – go to Brahma the creator to know from him what was the very best for them. To their utter surprise Brahma answered very cryptically repeating a single syllable 'da'. The delegation had to interpret this 'mantra'. Humans interpreted 'da' as daana, demons as daya, and demi-gods as dama.

This was a perfect formula Brahma offered for the three different personalities to achieve not only just mental health but also to get rid of their lifestyle ailments. Those suffering from excessive anger to get administered with doses of compassion; those who are blinded by flamboyant lives to be self-controlled; and, those ruled by greed to donate and share.

A major lesson we learn from this story and our classical traditions of health is that health is a holistic concept addressing to not just one aspect of the person but his/her complete personality. So, the lifestyle, day-to-day affairs, ideals and worldviews would define what would constitute health for each individual. When we talk about mental health in the context of spiritual practices and ideas what we discuss is not just about curing a finite number of deficiencies or ailments but about better expression of inner potential, better social engagement, a better sense of wellbeing.

What is Spirituality?

Considering a person to be a whole being, what Indian spirituality offers is integrated health. In the Indian traditions the ideas and values behind 'spiritual living' are those which support the role of personal growth, ecological awareness, empathy, intersubjective transactions, emotional wellbeing, efficiency in expressions and creative living. The distinct feature of the psychological traditions of Indian thinking is its spiritual openness, by which I mean, not just a liberal philosophy, but the facility to integrate new experience and new understanding into an evolving scheme of ideas and lifestyle all leading and pointing to self-exploration. The individual and his/her experience is the key.

But the significance for experience is how experience could help achieve a certain degree of transcendence – by going beyond personal, social and spiritual limits – through transformation in your worldview, by seeing yet another point of view and thus being open-minded, with more self-reflection, sensitivity to oneself and others. All these could help achieve mental peace, personal growth, stability, and a sense of fulfillment.

Healing and not Cure

Healing is the goal of Indian psychological traditions. It is not limited to cure but continues with therapy guided by one's own mental disciplines and spiritual practices. Since the focus is on mental health and not necessarily mental disorder, the goal fulfilled through healing is not redemption but progress recorded in a scale which marks in the order from mental health to spiritual uplift. Healing, in this sense, is not an event caused by an external source. Healing happens with the consistent and continuous efforts of the individual.

Though the experience could be described as therapeutic, the process is not therapy, but Self-healing. Spiritual healing, in the Indian context, is not by cathartic methods but by creating transpersonal ideas, visions, thoughts, experiences, goals, world-views and most important self-identity. An array of 'spiritual tools' and practices are offered, which are different both by kind and order, to create new experiences, to re-look the given situation from a new perspective and to respond anew.

The reason for the emphasis on healing and spiritual progress is the philosophy that spirit is the crux of mind and body and hence continued mental health is continued self-exploration. The quasi-philosophical issue about health and self-identity share a common platform with Indian psychology towards higher states of mental health and spiritual existence. Transformation and evolution of consciousness imply basic attitudinal and self-identity changes and shifts. The concept of healing thus is not just a solution to a problem but a state of perfection aimed at by one and all. Indian spirituality, best expressed, is Indian spiritual psychology.

Prayer and Meditation

Forms and words, to a large extent, are the initiators for our thoughts and interactions. The same word can create dissimilar experiences for different people. The same person can evoke different responses from different individuals. Classical traditions of India have always considered words to have great transformative power. The philosophy that underlies the idea of 'mantra' is that the power of certain words and sounds can create a change in our energy levels. Associated with this philosophy is also the importance of visualization techniques. Patanjali Yogasutras tell us how alertness and better understanding of mind (and thereby controlling) could lead us to self-stability. To be established in our spirit, the core of our being, it is essential to start with physical and mental stability. To be stable and comfortable in the way we sit is important to go farther into the experience of inner realisation.

At the same time, we have to keep in mind that, the journey from the physical plane to a spiritual plane is not purely a hierarchical process. Infact, to be always in touch with the core of your being is the only way to ensure that your mind's health is taken care of. This is achieved through practice of meditation and prayer. Meditation and prayer help to decrease 'restlessness' and allow to be restful in a deeper sense.

Cultivating Positive Values

Spiritual healing, according to Patanjali, is not a treatment for an ailment in the strict sense. But it is more and better approximation towards inner stability and corresponding positive values. He talks about 'afflictions of mind' – 'cittaklesa' – such as depression, disinterest, paranoia, lack of trust, carelessness, laziness, inability to restraint, despair and so on. These 'afflictions' are to be removed or checked by the introduction of a set of positive values such as friendliness, compassion, cheerfulness and forgiveness. The commonality in the various traditions on spiritual healing is the importance of social engagement, positive thinking and practice of positive values. Spiritual healing and thereby mental health is considered not a secluded activity. The *Bhagavad Gita* talks about a series of positive values which are of personal, social and spiritual significance, to be the best tool for self-abidance. A major idea in the *Gita* is that work, any productive engagement, and meditation are complementary to each other.

Meditation and Non-reaction

Work in the real sense, according to the *Gita*, can be executed only by a meditative mind. At the same time you can meditate only if you have gained the evenness of mind through non-reactive performance of work. Hence, in order to work one has to meditate and in order to meditate one has to work. A Yogi is one who engages in work with a meditative mind. Work does not add something to the Yogi's consciousness, nor it reduces his/her inner contentment. Work becomes a constant source of inspiration for him/her. Since s/he never reacts, s/he responds spontaneously to a situation. The *Gita* identifies meditation with a non-reactive mind.

Control of thoughts is possible only for a non-reactive mind. When consciousness is expressed creatively it is creative work. When work is performed meditatively it is realisation of the Self as Pure Consciousness. Hence engaging in action is meditating on the Self. An advise that Bhagavan gives Arjuna is to be an 'instrument' – 'nimittamatram'. One who guides his/her psychophysical setup with the attitude of employing an instrument is always alert and has better ability to see events and situations in a more detached and objective manner. But it is not to be taken that such a detachment is non-involvement. It is not detachment in the sense of shedding responsibility or sensitivity but creating a balanced mind that can view a situation from different perspectives and respond creatively.

Yoga, Skill and Happiness

The *Gita* gives interesting definitions for yoga that indicate social engagement and 'active' meditation as complementary. One definition is 'yoga is skillfulness in action' – 'karmasukausalam'. According to this definition, yoga is maintaining the evenness of mind for the efficient performance of work. Such an evenness of mind also guides decision-making process to follow a middle path, by being steadfast in an inner calm – 'samadai achala buddhi'.

Another definition is that yoga is 'disjunction from unhappiness' – 'dukhasamyoga viyogam'. Yoga must be practiced with determination and with non-depressed heart. Here, yoga is described by the principle of exclusion, using double negatives to indicate that yoga is not a state to be acquired, but which is to be realised by the removal of a false perception. It is the disjunction from the apparent conjunction with unhappiness. Yoga is the disunion from the apparent identity with unhappiness. The *Gita* advises that instead of eliminating unhappiness, one should look into it and see that it has no existence.

Happiness is another name the *Gita* assigns for mental health. Happiness that is not bought with objects, events or persons signifies the spiritual nature of self that is pure consciousness. What is meant by happiness is not the transient pleasure got from an object of experience, which comes and goes. Happiness is 'aksayasukham' – the endless and perpetual joy. Spiritual healing happens when we do not make happiness an object to be acquired, but engages as a happy person.

Being mindful and alert is the basic principle for mental health and spiritual healing. To be mindful and alert what is needed is a dispassionate and detached overview of situations. Such a detached mind makes creative responses and stays in meditative calmness. There begins spiritual healing.