



Summary Article

Culture, treatment and healing

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The principle of healing is universal. It transcends the boundaries of time and place. What differences are there in basic physiologic and psychological parameters, for instance, between those dwellers of the Neolithic caves, and the residents of the 21st century suburban estate, city warren or high-rise apartment in Metropolis? Do the laws of wound healing differ between the people in the Tropic and the Arctic? Or, East and West? What change have there been in basic human aspiration, needs, wants, dread, or suffering since time immemorial? It is these beliefs in universality that has been a driving force behind the advance of the modern health sciences including biomedicine, psychology, sociology and ecology.

Yet, the ways we see, think, approach sickness and health have greatly varied depending on historical period and cultural environment, ranging from, among others, bodily humor, miasma, witchcraft, possession as the source of mental illness, body build as the basis of character type, or more recently the belief in “irrational, aggressive and predatory” human nature—Unconscious—as the source of human predicament. Reigning currently is the biological theories—the vicissitudes in molecular and genetic factors as the cause of, prescriptive basis and cure for mental illnesses. Such correlation between theories, history and culture has not been limited to the problem of health but is an illustration of the historical pattern of human thought as suggested such as by creationism versus evolutionism, and geocentrism versus heliocentrism. In other words, history demonstrates that the prevailing view on life, society and cosmos is as much a reflection of culture as it is of reality.

This is a why a better appreciation of culture is crucial in deciphering the principle of healing. Let me illustrate the point by comparing a respectively characteristic Eastern and Western approaches to healing. First, however, a clarification of the meaning in which a few basic terms in this brief essay is being used because of our over usage of them has made their meaning blurry. They are *culture*, *body/mind*, and *East/West*.

Culture is a totality of human legacy. Consisting of and complexly interwoven with material and non-material components, it includes, among others, food, clothing, shelter, customs, mores, language, knowledge and technology, and values. And the culture as a coherent whole suffuses

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one's life from the cradle to grave, imprinting, shaping and structuring one's body and mind--the life.

Life, in health and sickness, is a unitary process, indivisible and integral. In health we are normally un-conscious of whether one's state of being is more physical or mental in nature. With the beginning of human language, a most characteristically human trait, the indivisible began to be divided into flesh/spirit or body/mind. In health the two are in harmony and balance and we are aware not the two but simply of aliveness. In sickness, however, we become aware not only of the body and mind but their subdivision--each component organ and faculty, and their subdivisions. And today we have a formidable and different system of technical language for each realm *in theory*, even though in daily *practices* we approach the problems as if they are one as they are. There is no mental condition without physical substrate as there is no physical condition without mental representation—conscious or not. The respective languages for body and for mind are like algebraic and geometric symbolic systems, each can explain differently the same reality such spatial problems as triangle, square or round. Each biological or psychological language cannot supplant the other, but together they can help our understanding. Mindful of these I shall dwell on the language of culture and psychology.

Finally, “*East*” is used as much in metaphorical as in geographical and cultural sense.

Geographically it refers to the area from South Asia to Northeast Asia, where a half of humanity lives. Culturally, there are many countries, cultures and languages, each displaying colorfully dissimilar and diverse surfaces. Beneath the surfaces, however, there prevail basic common values that have been transmitted through their traditions. Likewise, common basic values, beneath the surface variations, define the *West*. Of the values an especially relevant one involves the idea of “person” or “individual.” This is the idea into which many cultural tributaries flow in and from which outflow various corollaries informing our views, among others, of health and sickness, feeling/thinking, intuition/logic, feminine/masculine, and individuals/society. On this level, East/West has a metaphorical meaning: A projection of pervasive division within each of us and each society between individual and his/her society. The division needs to be balanced and harmonized for healing and peace.

The traditional meaning of “person” -explicitly, implicitly or in prefiguration—can be found in the major traditions of the world- Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (Smith, 1958).

This essay illustrates a correlation between history, cultural values (in particular “personhood”) and therapeutic approach as exemplified, for instance, by a representative Eastern and Western approaches, namely, meditation and psychoanalysis. More specifically it highlights a relation between the culturally given meaning of “human nature” and logically consequent and contrasting approach toward healing. And, it concludes with a question, what and how can we learn from the contrasts.

Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years usually in association with major religious traditions of the world. Or, stated differently, the essential mechanism of meditation can be found in daily life universally and in association with all the religious traditions—but conceptualized differently in different cultural circumstances. It has been allowed to be seen better in association with Hinduism and Buddhism. Since the two traditions are related as Catholicism and Protestantism are related in West, meditation can be said to be a representative Eastern approach. For a proposed psychology of meditation based on this writer's experience and observations the readers are referred elsewhere. (Wood, 1959; Ross, 1969; Humphrey, 1972; Chang 1974, 2005a, 2005b).

For the purpose of this essay, however, we can consider the meaning of *nirvana*, the psychological ideal in Buddhism, the rationale for meditation. A Sanskrit term, *nirvana* is often rendered, misleadingly, as “ego-less-ness.” This is misleading especially to English-speaking consciousness because in Western view “ego” must and needs to be strong. There has been much

debates on this but let me only note that the term is used in a considerably different sense in East and West.

Nirvana literally means “blowing out,” “extinguishing,” or “cooling” of (personal) greed, hatred, and undue desire from which originate conflicts within one’s mind and without in relation to others. To resolve the conflicts, then, those greed, hatred and undue desire have to be curbed if not resolved. This is possible because those traits are *not innate but acquired* human traits. In fact, Buddhists believe, human nature is *innately benevolent* (read purposeful, self-healing or rational). And meditation is an approach to experience the nature by removing (or resolving) the walls that separates the two selves within (e.g., “real” and “false”) and person from others, or the individual from his/her society.

Strong ego is the goal of psychoanalysis, however. This is logical given the belief in irrationality (or “evil”, e.g.: aggressive and predatory and chaotic human nature) of human nature. It means to suppress and control the chaotic nature by means of ego, the carrier of reasons if not Reason. This is a why the goal of psychoanalysis is in “strengthening” ego. However, human nature and Nature are vast, which is a reason for certain pessimism in Freud (1930).

The aim of the meditative approach is in removing the smaller self so that the Greater Self (that is benevolent, purposeful, rational and therefore healing) may emerge, whereas in the other it is in letting ego prevails where there is id, the darkness.

In the course of historical meeting of the two, East/West, and from a standpoint of intellectual history, it is interesting to note that the three streams of Western thoughts were especially attractive to Asians in search of West: psychoanalysis, Marxism and Christian theology. A few of the reasons for the attraction, if I may venture to suggest, is that they were comprehensive in scope, and the underlying belief in an irreconcilable conflict—that is, antithetical dualism—between the rational/irrational, the oppressed/the oppressor, and good/evil—were refreshing in the civilization immersed in the age-old belief in benevolence of Nature and human nature and consequent complementary dualism. The pervasive theme of irreconcilable, one may suggest, is a basic driving for a highly analytical nature of the works as psychoanalysis, Marxism and Christian theology illustrate. It may be reasonable to suggest that to Asian intuition they, the three streams of thoughts, represent an “essence” and essential pattern of Western thoughts.

For the purpose of this essay, however, what can we learn from the above? One of the questions is how can the contrasting premises and consequent two patterns of thoughts can be reconciled? Neither-- up/down, right/left, right/wrong, good/evil, day/night, intellect/feeling, individual/society, masculine/feminine, ad infinitum--can be replaced by the other because they apparently represent universal pattern of human thought that divide and contrast, namely, dualistic thinking. From this perspective, one can consider East/West as a projection of the division within each and all of us. The two forces need to be balanced and harmonized. Much needs to be done, however.

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