

SOME HINDU INSIGHTS ON A GLOBAL ETHIC IN THE CONTEXT OF DISEASES AND EPIDEMICS

by *Varadaraja V. Raman*

Abstract. As we develop a global ethic in the context of diseases, we need to reconsider the wisdom of the religious traditions, for there is more to ailments than their material causes. In the Hindu framework, aside from the Ayurvedic system, which is based on herbal medicines and a philosophical framework, there is the insight that much of what we experience is a direct consequence of our karma (consequential actions). Therefore, here one emphasizes self-restraint and self-discipline in contexts that are conducive to self-hurting behavior.

Keywords: *Ayurveda; Brihadaranyaka Upanishad; disease; karma; niyama (self-discipline); yama (self-restraint).*

With the spread of science and technology and associated values of enlightenment, it was already becoming clear in the first decades of the twentieth century that the world was shrinking. By the close of that century, the interconnections between nations and cultures had become globalization: a new experiment in human history, with enormous potential for good and bad.

We have yet to learn what the long-range economic aspects of globalization will be. There are those who see in it the panacea for the economic distresses of industrializing nations of the world. Others see in it the evil machinations of a capitalistic West thirsty for more markets and cheap labor to exploit. For some, the cultural aspects of globalization conjure up

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grotesque images of Coca Cola, McDonald's, and Kentucky Fried Chicken cluttering every city and street in the world.

Globalization seems to hold some promise at the ethical level where one speaks of freedom, democracy, and human rights. Here, too, some nations (at least their governments) argue that these constructs of Western civilization are utterly inappropriate in other cultural historical contexts. The West, through its hegemony in the United Nations, linguistic dominance, and international broadcasting, is propagating its own version of right and wrong for everybody; clearly, this is not appreciated everywhere.

Yet, even in a world with many streams of religious thought and practice, the ultimate goal to which most people aspire is peace and harmony. Every religious tradition has at its core ultimately positive ethical principles. Many people of goodwill have been struggling to see whether they can sort out some useful common elements from the various cultures of the human family that may be used as guidelines for healthy human behavior and concerted action toward the welfare of humanity. This is not so much an intellectual quest as a worthy cause, for unless the human family has some unifying norms and ideals the potential for conflicting interests and cultural chaos is considerable in a complex world. In order for these norms to be respected and embraced by all peoples, they will also need to be anchored in various historical traditions, for these are what give meaning and spiritual sustenance to people everywhere. It is in this spirit that the present symposium is conducted.

DISEASES

Today we have a far better grasp than ever before of the nature and origin of a great many of the diseases that have been plaguing humankind since time immemorial. From the perspective of modern science, all diseases have material origins—ambient environmental conditions, invading bacteria, cellular malfunction, or whatever. The knowledge that science has accumulated is powerful and of immense value. Insofar as we can alleviate or cure many ailments through physiochemical means, scientific knowledge has been very useful.

From a religious perspective, two things may be said about disease. The first is that some higher power (God or some other supernatural being) has something to do with the onset and persistence of ailments. Often it is believed that by propitiating the presumed higher entity one may be relieved of the pathology. Serious science has some disagreement with religion on this matter.

The second proposition made about disease in the religious context is closer to the facts of observation: that many diseases may be avoided by controlling human behavior. In other words, not all of the diseases that afflict us are unfortunate impositions by some higher authority such as

God and spirits or invisible entities such as bacteria and viruses. Some are quite clearly direct consequences of our excesses and transgressions. Eating and drinking beyond reasonable measure, exposing oneself excessively to cold weather or scorching sun, or engaging in unsafe sexual practices can all lead to discomfort and disease, just as putting one's fingers deliberately into a flame is certain to cause a burn, irrespective of habitual prayer or one's belief in God.

Because of its essentially matter-energy framework and because its primary concern is with cures and remedies, science seldom touches on the behavioral causes of diseases. In the rare instances that it does, the whole matter is cast in the language of cause and effect rather than that of a moral perspective. Thus, a doctor would more likely recommend avoiding too much fat or alcohol because of their potential painful consequences than intimate that overindulgence is morally wrong.

Given that aspirin relieves the headache of both sinner and saint, the purely materialist basis of science has greatly impacted society's overall appraisal of ailments. It leaves out of consideration any moral constraint and also assumes that there is some kind of chemical or surgical remedy for every ailment. This has led to some disastrous consequences, including the spread of venereal disease and AIDS.

HINDU PERSPECTIVES

The traditional Hindu framework of medicine is Ayurveda, a system that originated long ago but has undergone appropriate modifications over the centuries. Its more classical format rests on certain ancient scientific world-views, such as the three-humor (*tri-dosha*) and five-element (*pancha-bhūta*) theories of the material dimension of the body. It is also based on certain metaphysical assumptions, such as a three-qualities (*tri-guna*) framework in ethical attributes to food, thought, and attitudes, and three sheaths (*tri-kosha*) enveloping the body. It also assumes the existence of certain supernatural factors, including the power of the *mantra* (magic incantation) and the existence of evil spirits.

Ayurvedic practitioners explored and wrote on practically every known disease of the time, of every limb and organ, and developed remedies ranging from potent herbs and diets to physical exercises and curative chants. They also recommended effective codes of conduct for physicians and formulated principles for the prevention of ailments.

Prevention is far better than cure, and in the Hindu traditional system proper behavior was believed to protect one from many diseases. Now the question arises as to what proper behavior is. Several ethical systems in the Hindu world provide answers to this question.

In the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad*, the cardinal principles are presented in the form of a story that includes wordplay. It is said that when three

groups of beings went to the Creator-principle to find out what constituted genuine virtue, the only answer they received was the sound *da*. One group interpreted this to mean *dama*, self-restraint; the second thought it meant *datta*, giving; the third thought the sound indicated *daya*, mercy. It is said that humanity is periodically reminded of this when the thunder roars as *da-da-da*.

A dual classification of Hindu ethical principles becomes relevant in the context of disease prevention. To the first category belongs self-restraint of all kinds. This is referred to as *yama*. The reasoning is as follows: There are a great many temptations to engage us in activities that are not healthful in the long run. Aside from common vices such as the misuse of tobacco and alcohol, many occasions arise that make people violent in word and deed. There are also sins committed in secret. All of these are injurious to the self in the long run. In sum, abstinence from all vices will ensure a healthy life.

The second kind of ethical principles is known as *niyama*. Here the focus is on mental modes that are conducive to physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. These include meditation, purity of thought, and penance, in which both self-discipline and reflection play a role. In modern discussions on preventive medicine, whether in theory or in practice, one rarely mentions the relevance of *niyama* in the maintenance of physical health and mental equilibrium. Yet it is a fact of common observation that exercising self-control in eating, abstaining from intoxicants, refraining from overindulgence, and avoiding promiscuous behavior all shield the individual from a variety of avoidable ailments.

The point stressed in the Hindu framework is that these steps for the prevention of diseases cannot be taken unless one is trained in—that is, has conditioned oneself to—a meaningful ethical framework. It is fair to say that a great many diseases in today's world, from heart disease and alcoholism to diabetes and AIDS, result in part from improper (self-inflicted) behavior rather than from external influences.

In the Hindu framework this element is also incorporated through the doctrine of *karma*, consequential action or behavior—that is to say, acts and attitudes that have impact, positive or negative, on oneself or others. This is what is implied when it is said that people who suffer from certain diseases are reaping the fruits of their *karma*.

Pharmaceutical drugs and surgical interventions, which are based on detailed understanding of biological processes and human anatomy, are undoubtedly among the great contributions of modern science. However, in keeping with its self-imposed objectivity and the purely mechanistic interpretation of the human body, modern medicine has often underestimated or ignored the importance of mental states in the overall well-being

of the body. True, one talks about psychosomatic disorders, but one seldom considers systematic ways of organizing the *psycho* part to influence the *soma* part.

At one level meditation, yogic practice, and the associated world picture are recommended to the aspirant for achieving spiritual experience, development, and enlightenment. At another level they are meant to guide the average person in maintaining a lifestyle that is likely to develop defense mechanisms against many diseases.

Aside from effective medicinal herbs and healthy dietary rules, the contribution of Hindu worldviews to modern iatric practices has this important dimension: the cultivation of disciplined behavior, which keeps the restless mind from craving what is unhealthy and harmful in the long run. The practices also result in an inner peace that is no less important than a muscular body with a good pulse rate. Ultimately, the goal of human life is to spend the years not only in good health but also in harmony with the world around.