

The Four Assumptive Worlds of Psychopathology III B- Distorted/Inaccurate Views of Reality

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Eastern World

The term ‘eastern’ does not seem to be a fair generalisation when we discuss philosophical traditions, considering there are so many variations to any topic under discussion, much like the word ‘western’. The philosophies have gone through upgrades in time and many of them have intermingled with other similar ones as a result of invasions, modifications due to some perceived threats in the society and the need to express them in new ways. These teachings have been transmitted from generation to generation through oral traditions, through a chain of teachers and disciples. Though some of these traditions from the east value the ‘originality’ and consider any adaptation as deviations from the real, it was almost impossible to ‘protect’ them from modifications. Translations into various languages from Chinese, Sanskrit, Pali and so on in the last 200-300 years have made them accessible globally. Some teachers from the west have made these concepts so easy for those who have no background in any of the eastern traditions of lifestyle – which some of us from the East appreciate so much, having sometimes lost in the jargons and complexities.

Epistemology

The world according to the eastern traditions begins with one’s own body and experiences seemingly originating from outside, encountered through that body. At its heart, the individual selfhood or ego is not taken as a concrete entity with fundamental inherent substance. The individual selfhood or ego is constructed like any concept. And while concepts of solidity can make conventional life convenient, but closer scrutiny reveals that change and impermanence is the only reality. In meditational practices, many people experience the non-dual reality. For instance, it is not about a person with a mind and body standing apart from the universe and experiencing a world outside, but it is about pure awareness that is experiencing the arising of the constructed ego, the body and the rest of the world.

From this point of view, as far as epistemology is concerned, the question about the existence of a real world comes down to the experience of the body and the experience of a world through that body: five senses and mind. The body is experienced at least in three different ways: body as arising from nothingness when one is in deep sleep, as sensations when eyes are closed and as a solid structure with parts when seen through the eyes. The ego is seen to be lacking in any inherently substantial entity just like everything else we perceive. So, what is ‘real’? The eastern perennial traditions conclude that the external world does not have an independent existence apart from the awareness that

is aware of it. How do we then describe the world we experience? In various traditions, specifically Buddhism and Hinduism, the conclusion is that the world is nothing/empty, the world is a mental projection that exists only as far as the mind exists, the world is just energy, the world is apparent reality, it is real and unreal at the same time. 'Form is emptiness and emptiness is form' - this phrase stated in the heart sutra probably sums it up very well.

Language

As far as language is concerned, eastern traditions equivocally agree that language is not capable of describing reality. (In this context, 'real' may be understood as what absolutely exists and without which nothing else will exist, & whose existence cannot be disproved). Words rise from reality and is only a fragment of the whole. A fragment is incapable of understanding or expressing the whole. Also, the linear language structure of Subject Object delineation creates confusion when we try to use such language to investigate the work. Language is convenient yet limiting. The words we use to describe Reality often causes confusion. Hence the proponents of the eastern traditions like Taoism, Buddhism and Non dual teachings are against the application of language to investigate reality. Rather the best path is often seen as the application of meditation to trust our first-hand experiences. When we rest into pure awareness, we begin to experience a breaking down of boundaries. The subject and object separation is not real. Our pure awareness appears to permeate all. Therefore, the rigid identification of awareness to the body or the individual self, looking out at an external world is an illusion. It is like an optical illusion. Remember the saying from Lao Tzu: "If Tao can be described, then it is not real Tao".

It is also important to note the teachings in silence mentioned in texts and the description of reality in Upanishads as 'the place where the words retract.'. For instance, when we use the word "table" to refer to a wooden item which was previously taken from a tree which was originally grown from the soil, one begins to know that everything in the universe is interdependent which results in co-dependent arising. Language often obscures this reality. Quantum mechanics and quantum physics are relatively new disciplines that have very effectively challenged our traditional views in science. The mind which is consciousness appears to create the very reality we witness. And nothing is inherently substantial and separated in this constant flux or change.

Causality

It might be required to depend on causality to live in an apparent world, for example to treat an illness, one might need to identify the cause, articulate the causal relationship and prescribe a cure. In the eastern traditions, causality is attributed by a mind which is incapable of conceiving reality. One billiard ball hitting another displaces it – but how could we conclude one as the cause of the other?

Could our senses (in this case our eyes and our thinking that follows) determine the ‘truth’ or are they filtering ‘what is’ based on their limitations? Also, systems thinking informs us that multiple or countless factors can create the arising of a moment. It is not possible to determine the so called causes and effects. Linear thinking simplifies the cause and effect understanding to a point of causing severe distortions. Therefore, our highly simplified way of understanding the causes of illnesses can create distortions and the cure we prescribe can further aggravate the problems. In the East, being wholistic is critical in the way we approach the treatment of illnesses. For instance, in the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), understanding and alignment of energy or meridian flow is deemed to be more important for fundamental treatment. In Ayurveda, the primary goal is not to cure a disease, but to live a long and healthy life thus proactively preventing ‘dis-ease’, by understanding and adopting a wholistic perspective of reality.

Are We Stuck?

So, it is not possible to speak of mental illness (or speak of a real world that exists) from the essence of eastern traditions. The East would question the simplistic labelling or categorising of mental illnesses according to the DSM. There isn’t an OCD or a PD condition as though these illnesses exist as an actual entity in the world. We need to agree now that we will come to the level of apparent reality so that we can speak about a person, her body, mind and the illnesses – as though they are real, though they are not. This is what is done in the systems of medicine such as ‘Ayurveda’, without negating the experience of an apparent world, yet not forgetting its ‘unreality’ as an independent entity or a collection of independent entities. Hence the systems of treatment are basic, focused on well-being at all levels, realistic and just functional compared to the western medicine.

When ‘my life’ is just a ‘bad’ dream to be continued without a choice until I wake up, why would anyone focus on fixing it more than needed, expecting everlasting fulfilment from it? Thus, treatment of illnesses or dis-eases is about correcting the distortions of perceptions. We have to go beyond just prolonging life and reducing pain. The process of birth, growth, illnesses and eventual death is a natural one. In the East, “treatment” is about accepting this natural process and utilising this to gain realization of Reality. And the distortion of duality view has created much suffering. So in spiritual awakening, the East talks about the need to see clearly. To see without distortion is to see the non-dual reality and know that our identity isn’t a personal one fixed to a physical body which is constantly changing. Our awareness or consciousness at the most basic level is not personally tied to our individual history or background. Then we begin to realize that our attachment to prolong our personal life or pleasures or aversion to pain and losses are not necessary. We return to the Source (pure awareness) which was concealed thus far because all the obscuration of the unreal. So in the

East, even ordinary life is an illusion caused by dualistic distortions. It is the enlightened life that is truly complete.

The Body and the World

The creation is described for the sake of those who are curious (though the traditions are very clear that the mystery cannot be figured out with a mind). There are many variations, yet the common ground is the component nature of this apparent reality. Below are some examples of components that constitute matter:

1. Space, Air, Fire, Water and Earth
2. Sattva (noble qualities), Rajas (outward action-oriented qualities), Tamas (passivity and negative qualities)
3. Wood, Earth, Water, Fire, and Metal
4. Vata (air and space), Pitta (fire and water), and Kapha (water and earth)

Let us take Ayurveda as an example, originating from the vedic traditions and dating back more than at least 2500 years. In Ayurveda, (meaning the science of well-being/longevity of senses, mind, body and soul) the human body (sareeram) and mind ('manas' is mind and 'manasavikara' is mental disease) are under focus. The science indicates that the foetus grows from the five elements (space, air, fire, water and earth) and the subtle mind starts to form from the fifth month onwards. The diagnosis of any illness in body/mind, is based on the finding that the various elements that constitute the well-being are Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Their imbalance causes diseases and the role of a practitioner is to help the 'patient' regain their balance through multiple modalities including lifestyle, diet and medicine.

Causes of Mental Illness

In eastern traditions, specially Ayurveda, among many causes negative emotions that affect the mind are considered to affect the body causing illness. Fear, grief and anger for example affect the mind and then the body. Consuming food with a poised mind and with appreciation is considered important. Mind is considered a subtle manifestation whereas the body is a gross manifestation. Hence the mind influences the body and impacts the physical well-being. The illness in the body impacts the mind as well. Other causes of mental disorders are conflicted living, unwholesome interests, poisoned food, worms, uncontrollable passion/desire/fear and so on.

The Holistic Perspective

William Bergquist in his essay outlined how the Christian, Greek and European traditions view mental illnesses: caused by evil spirits and/or movement of organs and fluids within the body. In this essay, we will consider the eastern perspectives to be centred around energy. We will use examples from Ayurveda to demonstrate some practices, though there are many more like TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) that comes under the label eastern.

‘Prana’ represents the various groups of life forces flowing through the body. ‘Vayu’ (vital air in simple terms) is one of the components of this energy system. It is one of the tridoshas (the three bio entities Vata, Pitta and Kapha which are generally more concerned with the body) and is said to be the controller and prompter of the mind (manas). It is also said that the excited vayu depresses the mind, gives rise to fear, grief, stupefaction, feeling of helplessness, delirium. When Mind is seen as a combined psycho motor entity connected to the five sense centres and five motor centres, then Mind influences the bodily functions causing illness. In a view different from the western view, the Manas is said to be actively spread out throughout body except some parts such as nail and hair.

One of us remembers an Ayurveda practitioner visiting his home to treat a child who was not feeling well. Those days, the healer used to come home rather than the patient going to his clinic. After a few minutes of observation, the practitioner asked many questions about the family environment, even though being a member of our community, he knows our family well. He checked the child’s pulse and eyes – he observed the patient from a distance for a long time. He was mostly contemplative and quiet, rather than actively engaging and wanting to complete the consultation quickly. In a way, there was more observation in silence than conversations. There was more curiosity than advice giving. The practitioner seemed to connect with the patient with compassion, where they seem to suffer together for a few moments.

The prescription typically would include some unpleasant herbal concoction to be taken a few times a day after prayers, with strict instructions on daily routines including diet, physical activity and rest. Usually, the diagnosis will point to worms, worry or some similar mental disturbances in addition to the imbalance of bodily elements, change of seasons or something similar. Depending on the tradition some practitioners may point to spirits, ancestors and divine interventions.

Classification and Diagnosis

In classification of illnesses, for the healing sake, it has been divided into categories such as those originating from the body and then affecting the mind (e.g. fever or diarrhoea) versus those originating from the mind and then affecting the body (e.g. depression or grief, neurosis). Some

diseases are considered to be an affliction of both (e.g. psychosis, epilepsy). There are various modalities of examination prescribed. For example, in Ayurveda, the mind being subtle, it is impossible to directly 'know' it as the knower itself is a 'mind'. Hence the focus is on the next grosser level of manifestation as pointers to the mind. Responsiveness, conduct, facial expressions, habits, temperaments, psycho motor activities and many other means are adopted from the many frameworks available. Many of them focus on observation, inquiry, study of daily habits, demonstrated values in life, recent life experiences and interactions. Conclusions are based on understanding and inference and not on measurements and data.

Treatments

Treatment according to Ayurveda may generally be classified into three classes, though there are many variations and sub classifications. These are divine remedies or spiritual intervention, logic-based modalities and psychotherapy.

The first of the classifications is for those illnesses that are caused by extraneous reasons, such as psychosis and neurosis. The remedies could be anything like incantation, prayers, pilgrimage, wearing sacred herbs or precious gems, rituals, oblations, sacrificial offerings, fasting, giving gifts, vows, ceremonial penance, surrender and so on. The healer takes time to understand and make sense of the situation before the prescription. The second of the classification is treatment with diet and herbal drugs. For various mental illnesses, diet consisting of milk, ghee, meat, specific fruits and vegetables and herbs are prescribed. If the mental illness is caused more due to an imbalance of vata, pitta and kabha, the first step is a complete 'detoxification' or purification/elimination at the cellular level. This involves very elaborate processes of cleansing which consists of rest, disciplined eating, medication and purging/steaming/streaming/dripping with ghee, oil etc. The second step involves medication with tonics and palliatives in order to reinstate the deranged manas to normalcy.

The third category is more therapeutic including lifestyle changes. A healer is required to be a 'friend' in this role according to the texts, in order to influence the derailed mind to detract from 'unwholesome' objects of desire or fear. Change in occupation, location, routines and habits are recommended and specific prescriptions are offered in order to influence the mind through awareness, learning, courageous action, analytic thinking and so on. Mental disorders caused due to extreme negative emotions like grief, jealousy, fear etc. are also identified. The lifestyle changes will help these to be neutralised and more positive emotions induced in time leading to a cure.

In some texts, for some psychotic conditions and where the illness leads to violence, measures like calming the patient with assurances and words of religious and moral import are prescribed. It is also

possible that a shock be provided by announcing a loss, or creating awe or wonderment, or even threatening physical torture sometimes to discipline the patient before the treatment. Some of these are from more than 500CE and hence due consideration may be given in the interpretation of these recommendations and their relevance today.

We would like to highlight again that Ayurveda, is only one of the many traditions from the east. Most of them share a common understanding about life and living though. Ayurveda itself has many variations in its practice and hence it is not fair to generalise it nor use its principles as an indicator for eastern practices. Yet, they point towards the nature of the paradigm on which the practices are built. When the body, mind and the world are apparent reality, why not have fun with many variations and enjoy the diversity of perspectives, without having to judge one as right? Even the assertions of right and wrong belong the play of the apparent, like in a dream!

Contemporary Developments

Contemporary developments in the eastern traditions have contributed to adding and refining to the practices of healing mental illnesses. There is a view that all mental disease originates in a lack of clarity (sattva) within the mind and the primary goal of healing is the cultivation of sattva through proper lifestyle and through all five senses including spending more time in nature, meditation practices, and yoga. Some recommend staying away from the media and eating a sattvic diet, focusing on proper breathing and following a values/principles centred life style.

Accepting eastern practices will need a shift in paradigm (Kuhn, Zilboorg) compared to the western thinking. This shift is not far away considering the advances in the field of quantum physics, quantum mechanics, epigenetics and similar fields. Quoting Bergquist, “the mystery of life” need to be accepted as unknowable with the mind and not labelled as ‘emergence’. Eastern thought is founded on the conviction of this unknowability and hence the original ideas of healing were designed to manage the apparent life, just so that we can function adequately on our way to face what is real. Healing was not meant to feed an industry or promise beauty, comfort or longevity to a temporal body/mind. Those who were ‘at the table’ (from Bergquist) valued knowledge and truth more than anything else. Currently, the eastern systems are being influenced by the demand for anti-aging, aesthetics, body image, healthy living and hyped-up image of a spiritual life. The monks are dead and gone, the surgery is done by the politicians and research by the industrialists. The good news is that there is a possibility for a convergence and what could emerge would benefit the whole in ways we never imagined possible.

Conclusion

One of us who was born in a small town, remember many ‘mad’ men and women wandering around in our neighbourhood. We had a few in our big family as well. None of them were restrained or treated. Nobody considered it a big deal. They were social deviants in their own ways, appearance and views living in their own worlds. Children used to be afraid of some of them as they seemed to be so ‘different’. None of the adults were treating them any differently. In the years that followed, there were many changes: new buildings and offices came up, men started wearing pants, schools and hospitals were founded in our community. There were more people, noticing and ‘calling out’ of madness. Physical appearance and viewpoints needed to be more compliant than deviant. Many were called mad and locked up at home. One of us remember a family member, who used to be forcibly taken to a hospital once in a while for a ‘shock’ treatment. The uncomfortable feeling still remains - remembering his shouts and screams as he was escorted to a waiting van. He was very quiet when he returned.

There were a few others who were very interesting to be acquainted with – they had no sense of obligation or responsibility or demands. They seemed to be free spirits, in spite of many social or family expectations. Yet, they were bullied and kept away as mad men. Like “Frank” from one of the essays by Bergquist, did some of them fall prey to the expectations of a ‘developing’ society?

While some of us struggled to fulfil our social and family expectations, while we toiled to keep our ‘imposter’ hidden from the public eye, while we upheld the non-existent self-image up against the equally ‘fake’ others, we sometimes wonder: who really is mad?

Further Exploration

What we have highlighted is a just a drop in the ocean to the perspectives of the east. For those who are interested to explore more, a very good text to refer to is the Buddhist Abhidharma. This frames the psychological system of Buddhism explaining the workings of reality and the nature of the human mind. It is composed of detailed matrixes and lists that outline the interaction of consciousness and reality, the essence of perception and experience, and the reasons and methods behind mindfulness and meditation. Numerous psychoanalysts, psychologists, and quantum physicists are delving deeper into the text to discover the legitimacy of such first person (subjective) investigation of reality. The East has been doing such exploration for thousands of years.

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