

Consciousness and Health: another perspective from India

published in [Network Review No 75](#)

(SMN Member Natalie Tobert visited India earlier this year, and interviewed the psychiatrist Dr Soumitra Basu, at his clinic in Pondicherry)

While still a young lad, Soumitra Basu, had been inspired to study allopathic medicine and psychiatry in particular, in order to interpret it according to the visionary work of Sri Aurobindo. He studied medicine at the University of Calcutta from 1973 to 1980, and then did postgraduate work in psychiatry. Now in his early forties, Dr Basu is associated with a World Health Organisation project on spirituality and health, is co-editor of the journal 'NAMAH' (New Approaches to Medicine and Health), and pursues research on Integral Psychology in collaboration with senior *sadhaks* (ashramites) at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, South India. Today he has psychiatry practices in both Pondicherry and West Bengal. In Calcutta he has developed a co-operative working arrangement with shamans, a practice the W.H.O. encourages, since it allows outreach to traditional healers used by grass-roots people. In Pondicherry, he is also part of a medical team who in 1992, established the Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Integral Health and Research (SAIIHR). Their aim was to explore paradigms of health and psychology from a consciousness perspective. This group felt that although modern medicine had developed unparalleled achievements in the field of specialist research, there were various human issues that could not be explained from a mechanistic perspective. They believed a deeper understanding of the manifestations of ill-health could be found in the philosophies of Sri Aurobindo, who considered that consciousness antedated the manifestation of matter, and was the essence inherent in all reality. But who was Sri Aurobindo?

Born in 1872 in Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo was a revolutionary, poet and visionary. He was educated at St Paul's in London and King's College Cambridge. He participated in India's struggle for freedom, and became a leader of the nationalist movement. In 1908, while in solitary confinement, jailed for alleged terrorist activities against the British (for which he was subsequently acquitted), Sri Aurobindo began to receive inspirational insights. In 1910 he withdrew from the political field, and came to live in Pondicherry on the south-east coast of India, where he devoted himself to his spiritual mission. Silencing his mind, he received divine guidance about the nature of human existence, evolution on earth, and cosmic consciousness. In 1914, Madame Mirra Alfassa, who was known as the Mother, joined him in this spiritual mission. Born in Paris in 1878, she'd had unusual dreams and visions since she was a child. Like Sri Aurobindo, she too was an inter-dimensional seer. She was entrusted with manifesting Sri Aurobindo's vision. Her task was to create a society that embodied the new consciousness and included ideals about physical transformation.

An ashram grew up around Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. This consisted of an international community whose members wanted to realise the visions in a practical manner. Their ideal was to achieve divine life on earth as part of physical existence. The ashram provided (and still provides) essential services, housing and food for its members, and there are farms, handicraft and art centres, educational institutions and a gymnasium. The intention was that all activities would be designed to help the growth of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo passed away in 1950. Ten years later the Mother founded the Sri Aurobindo Society to explore ways of looking inside oneself in order to solve the 'outer problems of human existence'. Today, the Society has over 300 centres throughout the world, and its charitable and research

status is recognised by the Government of India. The organisation (SALIIHR), of which Dr Basu is a founding member, developed from that background. He has just had a book published entitled 'Integral Health'. In it he had mentioned the 'physician's dilemma'. Earlier this year, I interviewed him in Pondicherry, and invited him to explain what he meant.

"Usually a physician learns to cope with the reality of life in a better way than other professionals do. Face to face with life and death, he can realise his own limitations. Yet he too is overwhelmed by the existential crisis that marks the modern era. In the history of consciousness, a point has come today where all things which were hidden before, questions which were never raised, things in consciousness which never came to the surface, are now coming up. You see, even Freud talked about the repression of the unconscious. In a way now, nobody represses anything. Everything is exposed. This is true not only in individual life but also in collective life. Whether it is politics, public morality, international treaties, business pacts, or betting in cricket, nothing remains hidden. The pressure of consciousness is also revealing newer crises in the fields of health and psychology.

So consciousness has its own history. At this point in time, we are finding that the borderline between science and spirituality, science and mysticism has also become less rigid. It has happened within quantum physics as well as in mathematics, and so naturally it will be the same in psychology. The strict divisions between a psychologist and an occultist have to dissolve, because if psychology is to concern itself with the human mind, then it can neither ignore the mind of the scientist nor that of the mystic.

With this scenario, we need more information than we have learnt as doctors. We can see that we have our own limitations and we can't only make decisions based on what we have studied. For example, I have been told to withhold hydration to a comatose patient to facilitate passive euthanasia, but what should I do? For me, giving water to my dying father was a very important thing in my life, one of my most cherished memories. The day my father was departing, I was able to give him a spoonful of water on his tongue. How can I take a decision that denies the same experience to others? If a man tells me on his deathbed, "I remember that I was this and this in a past life", or if someone traces their illness to a past-life experience, or opts for active euthanasia, how should I tackle these situations? Such issues did not concern the physician 50 years ago.

Dr Basu pointed out that many people including physicians, in order to try and understand the issues raised by their patients, are looking at various non-conventional systems of medicine. But he suggests the answers cannot be found by using an eclectic combination of alternative therapies. He himself is exploring the relationship between health and consciousness, based on material Sri Aurobindo received by divine inspiration. This new paradigm of an integral approach to health may he says, assist physicians with their dilemma. He notes scholars in different fields and in different countries have used various models of consciousness, and interpreted the topic in different ways. He suggests we need to consider the scientific, mechanistic and the mystical approach to consciousness together, in order to have a more holistic understanding of health.

He comments: *"the mystic understands consciousness in a way which is different but also valid. The mystical view of consciousness is more experiential. If we do not consider the mystic and the scientific approach as opposites, but follow the classical Indian position whereby the macrocosm is represented in the microcosm, and the microcosm is represented in the macrocosm, then the consciousness which scientists are studying may be a reflection*

or a projection, or an inverse projection or even a deviation and distortion, of the higher spiritual consciousness."

In the book consciousness is explained according to Sri Aurobindo's hierarchical representation, and its relationship to health is illustrated. Dr Basu shows how the physical, social, mental and spiritual dimensions of health can be better understood in relation to the different planes of consciousness. He differentiates between the various concepts of consciousness including the medical and the yogic, and explains how phenomena such as NDE's, OBE's and energy healing fit within the hierarchy. I asked him to explain his view about how illness manifests in the body.

"We see how the different planes of consciousness have manifested one after the other in evolution until the mind has been reached. Yet Sri Aurobindo says that the human being is not a finished product, like in a sense, a flower is a finished product. It is so specific, so beautiful, you can tell it is something really complete in its totality. But humans feel that they are imperfect, that they have to develop. They don't feel as if they have developed all their potentialities to the maximum extent. They have that yearning to grow more and more. From a consciousness perspective, you can see how the planes have manifested one after another: the plane of matter that is represented by the physical body, the plane of life energy, and the plane of mind have sequentially evolved. We see that the complete harmonising of all the planes have not yet occurred in a human being. Consider that our physical body, our emotions and our mind are not properly harmonised. The mind might want something that our body might not want. Our emotions might want something that our mind doesn't want. The mismatching which goes on results in dis-equilibrium, and that can lead to a disease. Moreover the ego which tries to integrate the body, life energy and mind, cannot function properly because of its inherent limitations. A better harmonisation of the different planes of our being can be facilitated when we shift the centre of integration from the ego to a 'beyond-ego' principle. This shift is necessary for a holistic development of our being and is a harbinger of integral health."

Thus, he claims that disharmony between the different planes of consciousness manifests on the physical plane as ill health, and suggests that if we can address the inner disharmony, then we can effect healing. In the book he explains the planes of consciousness at which various therapies work including pharmacological drugs, acupuncture, energy healing, and psychotherapy. He defines the characteristics of the different planes of consciousness and ends each chapter with ideas for research, in order to explore an integral health programme. He suggests that health-seeking strategies, instead of searching from therapy to therapy, should explore how they each relate to the different planes of consciousness. He explained to me why people who engage in spiritual practices might fall ill.

"Even seekers who are not concentrating on the outer personality but decide to become very spiritual, do not automatically qualify for a holistic health. They might develop their inner being in such a way, that the outer being is neglected. So again there is a mismatch between the inner being and the outer being. That is the reason you will find that many people who practice occultism and spirituality fall ill, because certain parts of their being are more developed than others. So that the mismatch is between different levels, different perspectives. We are not perfect, The more we learn to harmonise the different parts of our personality, the more we learn to harmonise the different planes of our consciousness, the more we can rise above ill health, we can rise above disease."

Dr Basu had mentioned that he worked with shamans in his Calcutta practice. Sometimes they told him which patients needed his medicine, and which needed theirs. He had used the word 'occultist' a number of times and I asked him what he meant by it...

"By occultism we refer to something that is hidden, which ordinarily can't be seen. But there are hidden forces, which can be manipulated when these occult practices have been done for years. These forces are there in the collective unconscious, and the collective psyche of mankind. But such practices are dangerous and not meant to be done by everyone. I have seen some occult healers themselves becoming psychiatric patients, themselves becoming mad, because they can't control the power they develop. They become attached to their vital desires. They become greedy, or they become too egoistic, and then they spoil themselves. Even on occasion I told one or two to stop the practice. I have seen that they develop problems, because they don't always know the technique of defending themselves, and they overstep their limits.

This seems to suggest that those who engage in spiritual or esoteric practices, who don't look after their physical bodies at the same time, may suffer ill health. In the west, many people engage in a plurality of health seeking strategies that are influenced from therapies throughout the world. The shamanic practices of most Native American, African and Australian peoples suggest that one should be fully embodied. In contrast the traditions we have taken from the east suggest that we should practice detachment from the body. I asked Dr Basu whether Sri Aurobindo was suggesting that humans should detach from the body or become more fully embodied.

"This is a very interesting question because in traditional Indian spirituality the words detachment and liberation were always more favoured. Sri Aurobindo favoured the word 'transformation'. Transformation means you have to transfigure. In transfiguration, you do not detach from the body, you detach from the wrong vibrations, and you de-link yourself from the wrong movements. In this way you become a fit instrument for the manifestation of higher principles in your life itself, and not in a distant heaven. You have to concern yourself with the body, you cannot disregard it."

"Before, in the ascetic tradition, people usually wanted to neglect the body. Ascetic detachment often meant neglecting the body, but here detachment means inner detachment, and a de-linking from the wrong vibrations, for each one of the wrong vibrations can lead to ill health or disease."

Physical illness he says, is the last stage in the manifestation process of an inner disharmony. And once illness has manifested in the human body, it can be slow to heal. He explains how humans could tap into universal energy, and also use the mind to will the body to heal itself.

"The book talks about body consciousness: it is as if the body has a personality of its own, or a consciousness of its own, which can be developed. The body is like an instrument: the body consciousness can be developed in such a way that a mental will or suggestion can affect it directly."

"If you can go to your inner energies, you are free from the trappings of the mind and the body, then that energy can also be used in a better way. You can use that energy, not only to heal your own illness, but also for healing other's illnesses also. And that energy is in communion with the universal energy. The simplest example is little children. I don't know how it is in Europe, but in India one of the parents' commonest complaints, is that their children are very energetic, but they eat sparsely. They go to doctors and tell them that the

child does very well in studies, runs the whole day, and is eating very little, and they are very worried, because they fear that the child will fall ill. The child is full of energy, and doctors don't know what to do, so they prescribe drugs like cyproheptadine to increase the appetite, which in turn makes the child feel sleepy. But actually the secret is that the child knows how to tap universal energy. As children grow older they lose the faculty. As adults, we can regain that faculty by pursuing certain yogic techniques which teach us to universalise our vitality."

He ends the session by mentioning the damaging relationship of economics to health.

"Commercialism is a new facet of today's culture. It was not always in the forefront of society. In ancient India the economic factor was given a third position: the persons of learning and of valour were given the primary positions, and the economic person was a necessity but in a third position. Health is related to commercialism. With a culture that becomes too commercial, you can see how the pharmaceutical companies behave, how they are trying to stifle natural wealth and wisdom, how they pretend that herbs used by traditional people for centuries and centuries are not effective. These are the fruits of commercialism, and they have a very direct relationship to health. It has changed our values. However, as in the past, so once again in the future, non-economic factors can come forward to rule life and society. In Sri Aurobindo's concept of social evolution, the present individualistic period will be replaced by a more subjective era en route to a spiritualised, gnostic society. Developments in health and psychology have to be sensitive to these mutant changes in the collective consciousness."

The book 'Integral Health' is a small format (around 148 pages) written with the intention of clearly communicating information about a complex subject. It is useful for medical and complementary health practitioners, who are attempting to tackle spiritual concepts (their own and their clients). I should mention that Sri Aurobindo, while defining hierarchies of consciousness, used English words in a rather original manner: the glossary explains terms used in the text.

Integral Health by S. Basu (ISBN 81-7060-157-6)

Published by SAIHR, a unit of the Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry, India.

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