



“Yogi-doctors” and Occult Healing Arts:

Towards a Post-colonial Anthropology of Holistic Therapeutics at Sri Aurobindo Ashram¹

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I Introduction

In this paper I attempt a post-colonial anthropology of healing that documents a significant therapeutic practice reported from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.² The period under analysis covers the formative years of the Ashram, from the 1930s to the 1960s, when it was presided over by its masters, first Sri Aurobindo and the Mother together, and then, after the death of the former in 1950, by the latter. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram was a community that grew around the charismatic yogi, poet, philosopher, and former political revolutionary, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950). After studies in England from 1879-1993, Sri Aurobindo returned to India to work with Sayaji Rao Gaekwar, the ruler of Baroda, a princely state in British India. In 1906, he joined active politics following the partition of Bengal, quitting his position with the Baroda state. After a stormy and eventful, though brief political career, some of which was spent in the Alipur jail, he quit politics in 1910, arriving on the 4th of April to Pondicherry (now Puducherry), then a French enclave near Madras (now Chennai) in South India.

Following several years of intense yogic practices and prolific writing, a spiritual community was formalized around him in 1920, triggered by the final arrival on 24th April 1920 of the Mother (Mirra Alfassa, 1878-1973), his spiritual partner. The Mother was born in Paris, of Turkish-Egyptian Jewish parents.

She was an immensely gifted and precocious spiritualist, occultist, artist, and, administrator. By the time she arrived in Pondicherry, she was also widely travelled, having lived in Algeria and later in Japan. In 1968, the Mother went on to found Auroville, a city for humanity, made up of people from many nationalities and cultures.³

This account may be regarded as contribution to a kind of “salvage ethnography,”⁴ but with a difference. The culture and world-view that I seek to document does not belong to endangered indigenous peoples, but to a modern, even futuristic spiritual cult. Yet, the “knowledge” on health and healing embodied in the practice of this movement not only bears a close resemblance to submerged and occult traditions in both the East and the West, but to the main indigenous system of health care in India, namely Ayurveda. The latter, along with many other indigenous systems of healing, has had both to adapt and transform itself in the face of the dominance of modern bio-medicine in order to survive. In the latter portion of my paper, I turn to relationship between Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s theories of healing and both Ayurveda and modern bio-medicine.

In addition, I consider this paper “post-colonial” in at least two senses. First, in its concern with the textuality of healing practices, my account is really an interpretation of a rich archive of narratives. It is, in other words, about “stories” of healing and how we read them, not just about the substance of the stories.

Secondly, not only am I concerned with the “narrativity” of these healing practices, I also read them in terms of their power relations to dominant bio-medical therapeutics and the now subaltern indigenous systems. Such a toggling of power and textuality I regard as typically post-colonial. The “post” in not just post-colonialism or post-modernism, but in other “post-al” perspectives hinges on the “linguistic turn”. My attempt here, too, focuses on the discursivity of these healing practices. Indeed, the content and its “scientific” value are not my primary concern. I engage with them only in so far as they present alternative paradigms of knowledge or contending epistemologies. My reading is, thus, post-colonial because I see these stories as examples of “insurgent knowledges” or what Michel Foucault called the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” in the first of his “Two Lectures” (81). According to Foucault, these “subjugated knowledges” are often “naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required levels of cognition and scientificity” (82).

In this case, interestingly, these “insurgent knowledges” were resurrected, enunciated, further developed, and propped up by the personal authority of the Gurus. Eventually, they became part of a “magico-religious system” centered on the vast output of the Gurus, studied and perpetuated by the Ashram community. Thus, my own anthropology of this healing practice draws on this specific archive trying, at the same time, to read it cross-culturally so as to make it available to a larger body of interested interlocutors.

II An Introduction to the Therapeutic Practices at Sri Aurobindo Ashram

If we wish to get to the essence of Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s ideas on health and healing, we could examine how, according to them, both disease and cure occur. The Mother said that disease is basically an outcome of disequilibrium in the body: “all illness without any exception...is the expression of a break in equilibrium” (*Health and Healing in Yoga* 4). Similarly, the cure is really a matter of restoring the balance that has been disturbed:

After all, an illness is only a wrong attitude taken by some part of the body.

The chief role of the doctor is, by various means, to induce the body to recover its trust in the Supreme Grace. (*Health and Healing in Yoga* 103)

The Mother is clear that the role of medicines is secondary; actually, it is the body that heals itself:

In most cases the use of medicines...is simply to help the body to have confidence. It is the body that heals itself. When it wants to be cured, it is cured. (*Health and Healing in Yoga* 105)

The above statements were made by the Mother on 5th June 1957. Eight years later, on the 20th December 1965, she reiterates them even more emphatically:

In every case, it is the Force that cures.

Medicines have little effect; it is the faith in medicines that cures.

Get treated by the doctor whom you trust and take only the medicines that inspire trust in you.

The body only has trust in material methods and that is why you have to give it medicines—but medicines have an effect only if the Force acts through them.

Allopaths ordinarily cure one thing, only to the detriment of another.

Ayurvedic doctors do not usually have this drawback. That is why I recommend them. (*Collected Works of the Mother* 15: 170; henceforward referred to as CWTM).

If disturbance of equilibrium is the cause of disease and the restoration of equilibrium the cure, then an enumeration or typology of both these processes may be considered to constitute the bulk of Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s theory of healing.

I should clarify that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were not unacquainted with modern medicine. In fact, their vocabulary of both the disturbance and re-establishment of bodily equilibrium, that is, of disease and its cure, may even be brought in tune, not just with traditional Ayurvedic ideas, but also with current scientific and allopathic practice. Nevertheless, their approach to both disease and healing is radically different. To cite a telling example of this difference, for the Mother, even disease-causing microbes are manifestations of negative vital energies: “The microbe is a very material expression of something living in a subtle physical world” (*Integral Healing* 32). What at first may sound outlandish if not occult is a part of a larger theory which is internally consistent and unapologetic. In fact, such views, as I shall show, were not ad hoc or arbitrary, but developed over years of experience and efforts in healing. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother initiated and participated in many therapeutic experiments in which they directed their “spiritual” force through qualified and trained medical doctors. Their methodology consisted of a combination of the spiritual with the “scientific,” but in a manner which would be difficult for modern science to accept.

From such an overview of the broad principles, if we were to go into specifics, we would find ourselves floundering in a sea of words and ideas. This is because the collected works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother constitute a vast archive, running into over sixty-five volumes. The Mother’s views on healing occur in several places in her *Collected Works*, which run into seventeen volumes, and are also scattered through the thirteen volume *Agenda* which Satprem edited. Sri Aurobindo’s ideas on this subject, though not as voluminous, are significant in that they may be considered as providing the basis for the Mother’s own ideas, even though it is clear that he deferred to her in these matters. The Mother’s observations on various topics pertaining to the human body, though related to Sri Aurobindo’s views, may be considered to form a profound, far-reaching, and independent body of knowledge on their own. Thus, the Ashram tendency to club them together, almost as a matter of dogma, need not necessarily be followed blindly.

Because the archive is so enormous, we must often resort to compilations and selections, of which there are several. While such compilations serve as a quick introduction and digest, they have the disadvantage of quoting remarks out of context. We do not know when a particular statement was made and why. In addition, the absence of a chronological arrangement affords us no understanding of how some of the ideas changed or developed over time. The Gurus’ words are thus frozen and reified as if for all time in a sort of imposed coherence and consistency.

For the purposes of this paper, I have relied mostly on two such collections, *Integral Healing*, compiled from the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and *Health and Healing in Yoga*, which is a selection from the Mother’s works.⁵ What the latter excludes, however, is the extensive new material that is available in the *Agenda*. *Health and Healing in Yoga* arranges the Mother’s ideas in four parts, “Causes of Illness,” “Cures and Illnesses,” “Foundations of Health,” and “The Cycle of Life.” This division gives us a glimpse of the foundations of the Mother’s approach to healing. Towards the end of the book, we see health and healing to be a part of a much larger plan or project which the masters had embarked upon. To my mind, these two compilations serve to counterbalance the chronological and the thematic, thus giving becoming good, though not perfect, source-books on the subject.

Rather than begin with a detailed analysis of the Gurus’ views on health and healing, my strategy is to offer a more matter-of-fact account of a doctor who served as the Ashram’s physician. Such an account is also more accessible to most of us, who are grounded in modern bio-medical practices. It also locates the Gurus’ ideas in a more practical curative, even experimental, context. The account also shows how extensive and well-documented trials in healing were carried out at the Ashram over a period of time. It thus offers us a demonstration of some of the ideas which I shall return to later.

III Nirodbaran's Account of Experiments in Healing

In January 1930 when Nirodbaran, a trained doctor with a medical degree from the University of Edinburgh, met the Mother for the first time, she asked him "Where do you intend to practice?" (1). He replied that he would settle down in his native town. The Mother seemed to approve, "Yes, that would be good" (ibid 2). However, such was the force of this encounter that after spending a year and half in medical service at Rangoon and about the same time in his native Chittagong, Nirodbaran returned to Pondicherry in 1933. He lived there for the next seventy-three years, dying at the age of nearly 103 years.⁶

First assigned to a variety of menial tasks, including a stint in the timber godown, he wrote to Sri Aurobindo complaining that his medical education, which was completed at great cost, was being wasted. Sri Aurobindo replied, "What would you say if the Mother actually proposed to you to exchange the timber-trade for medicine?" (24). He was immediately transferred to the Ashram Dispensary as British subjects doctors from India could not practice in Pondicherry, which was a French territory. The French government had, however, given permission to Ashramite-doctors to practice within the Ashram's premises. This is how Nirodbaran came to be not just Sri Aurobindo's scribe and personal physician, but also the keeper of the longest correspondence with Sri Aurobindo running into over 4000 letters many of which were published in *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo* in two volumes.

The procedure followed at the Dispensary was that serious or complicated cases were to be referred to the local hospital, but all routine illnesses were handled by Nirodbaran. He would send detailed medical reports to the Mother, which were always read very carefully before instructions were issued. These latter were conveyed by Sri Aurobindo in his letters to Nirodbaran, but "all instructions relating to practical questions about sadhana and work were given by the Mother" (24). In 1937, after Sri Aurobindo's eyesight weakened, the Mother herself took on the onus of the medical correspondence. In 1938, after Sri Au-

robindo's accident, Nirodbaran was called upon to attend to him, thus ending his stint in the Dispensary and the medical correspondence. Even so, his connection with the Dispensary did not cease completely. When Sri Aurobindo's condition stabilized, Nirodbaran resumed attending to Ashram patients when he was off-duty.

All told, Nirodbaran's work at the Ashram Dispensary was highly illuminating from a medical point of view. As he himself admits, "About the medical treatment I had a lot to learn. In fact, it was in the Mother's School that I took initiation in the Healing Art" (24-25). According to Nirodbaran, the Mother's "knowledge of medicine was far beyond any average intelligent doctor's" (25). Though the source of this knowledge was "primarily intuitive," it was "also partly derived from her vast general experience" (25).

Nirodbaran began, as any ordinary medical doctor would, with "only the British Pharmacopoeia with its thousands of drugs and their curative properties" (26). Gradually, however, he learned that what his "orthodox medical mind" (26) knew was rather inadequate. He says, "I had to forget or change many of my accustomed notions about drugs and stop or be careful about their use. I had to learn to employ as few medicines as possible and thereby give Nature a chance to heal" (26). Sri Aurobindo himself sent Nirodbaran an article by a famous medical authority who had been the President of the Royal College of Physicians where the latter "advocated the theory that Nature cures 90-99% of our diseases and that medical practitioners are only agents of Nature" (26). We have already seen that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were rather conservative when it came to administering drugs and medications to patients. Similarly, "as a rule, the Mother was not well-disposed towards operations" (28).

In the course of time, Nirodbaran made a great discovery:

it is not the germs that cause the disease, nor the drugs that cure it but the doctor—that is, the man, the personality—that counts. In other words, the doctor is an instrument of a higher Force that uses him, and medicines play a secondary role. (26).

The result is that Nirodbaran tried, at some risk of criticism, to be a “yogi-doctor”: “I withheld drugs for simple maladies and left the patients to their faith or inner resistance” (26). Speaking about the causes of illness or what in medical parlance may be called the etiology of disease, Nirodbaran observes:

I further learnt that behind illnesses also there are forces. These forces, psychological or occult, attack first of all the subtle sheath that envelops the body and weaken it. Then only germs can produce an illness. Anyone who has a strong and sound sheath can go about in germ-infested areas during epidemics and will be immune to any contagion or infection. (26)

He admits, however that he does not know

what practical use can be made of the knowledge of the subtle sheath. A patient, if he is perceptive, can feel an attack coming upon him and ward it off in time before it enters his body, but what will be the doctor’s role in it unless he too is an occultist and helps the patient in an occult way? (27)

His greatest lesson was that “spiritual Force can cure diseases.” This does not mean that Nirodbaran totally suspended his skepticism or the rationality of his scientific training:

Though I believed in it, my outer medical being probably lacked a total faith. Or else my doubting nature stood in the way and I had to put up with the Master constantly drilling my brain and pouring in more and more faith. (27)

This tussle between science and spirituality, I am convinced, made Nirodbaran all the more effective as a medical practitioner.

IV The Mother on Disease: Its Causes and Cures

Having already introduced the Mother’s basic views on disease and healing earlier, in this section I shall

focus on one remarkable document, a long and involved statement delivered by the Mother on 22nd July 1953, and published in the Question and Answers series of 1953 in her *Collected Works* (CWTM 5: 173–181). The Mother had, on an earlier occasion, that is, 15th July 1953, assured her listeners

Next time we shall speak of health and illness and I shall confound all those who are attached by iron chains to their illness who do not want to let it go! I shall give them scissors to cut their chains. (CWTM 5: 166)

This was that promised deliverance. It is a fairly long statement, which starts with general observations and principles, then moves to specific topics and instances, and is very rich in narrative content because it contains a detailed story of the Mother’s experience of surviving an epidemic in Japan.

To begin, the Mother says quite unequivocally that “all illness without any exception – without exception – is the expression of a break in equilibrium” (173):

(I would add even accidents) come from a break in equilibrium. That is, if all your organs, all the members and parts of your body are in harmony with one another, you are in perfect health. But if there is the slightest imbalance anywhere, immediately you get either just a little ill or quite ill, even very badly ill, or else an accident occurs. That always happens whenever there is an inner imbalance. (ibid)

Then she goes on to differentiate the kinds of break in equilibrium, which she divides into the physical, vital and mental:

But then, to the equilibrium of the body, you must add the equilibrium of the vital and the mind. For you to be able to do all kinds of things with immunity, without any accident happening to you, you must have a triple equilibrium—mental, vital, physical—and not only in each of the parts, but also in the three parts in their mutual relations. If you have done a little mathematics, you should have been taught

how many combinations that makes and what a difficult thing it means! There lies the key to the problem. For the combinations are innumerable, and consequently the causes of illness too are innumerable, the causes of accidents also are innumerable. Still, we are going to try to classify them so that we may understand. (ibid)

We can see how the Mother starts with relatively simple principles, but builds them into a system capable of addressing the complexities of the actual reality.

When it comes to the physical loss of equilibrium, the Mother posits two categories:

First of all, from the point of view of the body—just the body—there are two kinds of disequilibrium: functional and organic. (ibid)

The first results from an individual organ being in disequilibrium, and hence, diseased. But even if all the organs are, in themselves, in good condition, the lack of proper balance between them would result in a "functional imbalance" which can also make a person ill (174). According to the Mother, functional imbalances are easier to cure, while an afflicted organ is harder to treat or set right. Much of CAM therapeutics is addressed to the functional imbalance. It would seem that organic diseases respond better to allopathy, though even in this type of cure it helps to address functional issues.

Further, the Mother divides the causes of the imbalance into two, internal and external (174). An internal imbalance can occur if one of the organs starts malfunctioning:

Suppose for example, your heart begins to throb madly; then you must make it calm, you tell it that this is not the way to behave, and at the same time (solely to help it) you take in long, very regular rhythmic breaths, that is, the lung becomes the mentor of the heart and teaches it how to work properly (175).

In this case, the balance is restored through a conscious effort directed at the lungs or the breathing ap-

paratus, which in turn tutors the heart to beat more slowly. This is the most frequent sort of inner disturbance that can cause illness. But the Mother also identifies another, the resistance of one part of the body while the others are willing to progress in Yoga:

There is an aspiration within you (I am now speaking of people who do yoga or at any rate know what the spiritual life is and try to walk on the path), within you there is a part of the being—either mental or vital or sometimes even physical—that has understood well, has much aspiration, its special aptitudes, that receives the forces well and is making good progress. And then there are others that cannot, others still that don't want to (that of course is very bad), but there are yet others that want to very much but cannot, do not have the capacity, are not ready. So there is something that rises upward and something that does not move. That causes a terrible imbalance. And usually this translates itself into some illness or other, for you are in such a state of inner tension between something that cannot or something that clings, that does not want to move and something else that wants to: that produces a frightful unease and the result usually is an illness. (175–176)

There is also the case of the whole being advancing except for a small part which is resistant:

Now there is the opposite, almost the opposite, that is, the whole being goes ahead, progresses, advances in an increasing equilibrium and achieves remarkable progress; you have the feeling you are in a wonderfully favourable state, everything is going on well, you are sure; and you see yourself already gloriously well on the way. Crack! An illness. Then you say: "How is it? I was in such a good condition and now I have fallen ill! It is not fair." But this happens because you are not completely conscious. There was a small part in the being that did not want to move. Usually it is something in the vital; sometimes it is a tiny mental formation that does not agree to follow; sometimes it is simply something in the body which is quite inert or has not the slightest intention of moving, that wants things to remain always as they are. It pulls

backward, separates itself wilfully, and naturally, even if it is quite small, it brings about such an imbalance in the being that you fall ill. (176)

Or:

somewhere in your being—either in your body or even in your vital or mind, either in several parts or even in a single one—there is an incapacity to receive the descending Force, this acts like a grain of sand in a machine. You know, a fine machine working quite well with everything going all right, and you put into it just a little sand (nothing much, only a grain of sand), suddenly everything is damaged and the machine stops.... There was something that could not receive; immediately it brings about a disequilibrium. Even though very small it is enough, and you fall ill. (178)

Overall, the Mother holds that illnesses often have causes other than purely physical ones:

the illness had another cause than the purely physical one; there was another. The first was only an outer expression of a different disorder, and unless you touched that, discovered that disorder, never would you be able to prevent the illness from coming. (179)

Such is an overview of the internal causes of disturbance.

Coming to the external causes, the Mother says that sometimes though one may be internally in perfect balance, the external surroundings may be “full of imbalance” (179):

you are obliged to receive what comes from outside. You give and you receive; you breathe in and absorb.... for you live in a state of ceaseless vibrations. You give out your vibrations and receive also the vibrations of others, and these vibrations are of a very complex kind.... You give, you receive; you give, you receive. It is a perpetual play.... all is contagious, everything. (179–180)

In such a situation, those who are hyper-sensitive

are bound to absorb the external disturbances. So a person can become ill even without there being an active negativity in the environment, just through the disequilibrium in the world outside.

But the Mother also identifies active ill-will, “Unhappily there is much bad will in the world” (180). Again, here there are two types. Sometimes, its carriers are themselves unconscious:

Unintentionally ... others are attacked, they don't know, they pass it on without even being aware of it. They are the first victims. They pass the illness to others.... (180)

While some people are unwitting mediums of such ill-will, there are others who are wilfully wicked:

There is a misguided, perverted occultism which is called black magic, it is a thing one must never touch. But unfortunately, there are people who touch it through pure wickedness. You must not believe it is an illusion, a superstition; it is real. There are people who know how to do magic and do it, and with their magic they obtain altogether detestable results... (180)

That is why the Mother insists that a sincere practitioner of yoga must never harbour negative thoughts about others: “All who do yoga sincerely must... never... have bad will or a bad thought towards others” (181).

It is now that the Mother comes up with her explanation of how the microbes are created:

there are in the physical atmosphere, the earth-atmosphere, numerous small entities which you do not see.... Some of them are quite nice, others very wicked. Generally these little entities are produced by the disintegration of vital beings—they pullulate—and these form quite an unpleasant mass.... They like little accidents, they like the whole whirl of forces that gather round an accident: a mass of people... And then that gives them their food, because, in reality, they feed upon human vitality thrown out of the body by emotions and excitements. (181–182).

The worst of these are "forces of disintegration," which, according to the Mother, "is the origin of germs and microbes" (181):

most microbes have behind them a bad will and that is what makes them so dangerous. And unless one knows the quality and kind of bad will and is capable of acting upon it, there is a ninety-nine per cent chance of not finding the true and complete remedy. The microbe is a very material expression of something living in a subtle physical world....The origin of the microbes and their support lie in a disharmony, in the being's receptivity to the adverse force. (181)

After this explanation of the origin of microbes, the Mother proceeds to narrate an extraordinary story of her own encounter with an epidemic in Japan at the beginning of January 1919:

it was the time when a terrible flu raged there in the whole of Japan, which killed hundreds of thousands of people. It was one of those epidemics the like of which is rarely seen. In Tokyo, every day there were hundreds and hundreds of new cases. The disease appeared to take this turn: it lasted three days and on the third day the patient died. And people died in such large numbers that they could not even be cremated....if one did not die on the third day, at the end of seven days one was altogether cured....There was a panic in the town, for epidemics are very rare in Japan. They are a very clean people, very careful and with a fine morale. Illnesses are very rare. But still this came, it came as a catastrophe.... (181-182)

The Mother often wonders "What is there behind this disease?" (182). For a while she is fine, but one day she is called to the other end of town. When she returns, she has caught it:

I had to cross the whole town in a tram-car. And I was in the tram and seeing these people with masks on their noses, and then there was in the atmosphere this constant fear....I came to the house, I passed an hour there and I returned. And I returned with a terrible fever. I had caught it. It came to you thus, with-

out preparation, instantaneously. (183)

The doctor is called, but the Mother refuses his medicine. She remains in bed, thinking "What is this illness? Why is it there? What is there behind it...?" (184). Then she finds out:

At the end of the second day, as I was lying all alone, I saw clearly a being, with a part of the head cut off, in a military uniform (or the remains of a military uniform) approaching me and suddenly flinging himself upon my chest, with that half a head to suck my force. I took a good look, then realised that I was about to die. He was drawing all my life out (for I must tell you that people were dying of pneumonia in three days). I was completely nailed to the bed, without movement, in a deep trance. I could no longer stir and he was pulling. I thought: now it is the end. Then I called on my occult power, I gave a big fight and I succeeded in turning him back so that he could not stay there any longer. And I woke up. (184)

The Mother now relates this to her earlier experiences:

But I had seen. And I had learnt, I had understood that the illness originated from beings who had been thrown out of their bodies. I had seen this during the First Great War, towards its end, when people used to live in trenches and were killed by bombardment. They were in perfect health, altogether healthy and in a second they were thrown out of their bodies, not conscious that they were dead. They did not know they hadn't a body any more and they tried to find in others the life they could not find in themselves. That is, they were turned into so many countless vampires. And they vampirised upon men. And then over and above that, there was a decomposition of the vital forces of people who fell ill and died. One lived in a kind of sticky and thick cloud made up of all that. And so those who took in this cloud fell ill and usually got cured, but those who were attacked by a being of that kind invariably died, they could not resist. (184-185)

Though this being was "irresistible," the Mother had

the occult knowledge and power to overcome it. After a few days, the Mother is told by a visitor that the epidemic has abated. When the Mother narrates her story to her friend, he goes and tells it to many others so much so that “They even published articles about it in the papers” (185). Unfortunately, these newspaper reports have not yet been found.

This extraordinary account resembles a mythological narrative such as the *Devi Mahatmyaham* or the “Glory of the Goddess,” a popular religious text extolling the victory of the Devi over *Mashisasura* or the “Buffalo demon.” Also called the “Chandi Path” or simply *Chandi*, this narrative of 700 verses extracted from the longer *Markandeya Purana* (c. 500 C.E.), is read ritualistically by devotees as a way of worshipping the Goddess. At its heart is a triumphant account of the feminine deity disciplining, overcoming, and finally beheading the hypermasculine fiend.⁸

The text recounts heroic battles between the Goddess and her demonic adversaries; each story illustrates a different aspect of the Devi’s divinity—*Mahakali* in chapter 1, *Mahalakshmi* in chapters 2-4, and *Mahasaraswati* in chapters 5-13. It is these precise names of the Goddess that Sri Aurobindo himself invoke in his celebrated text, “The Mother,” adding to it *Maheshwari*, another emanation or aspect of the Goddess. Originally written in form of letters in 1927, a revised version of this text is standard reading for the followers of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Not only does the book describe the Divine Goddess, but later Sri Aurobindo also explicitly identified the head of the Ashram, the Mother with the former.⁹ It is thus a text that deifies the Mother, making her a living Goddess. In narrating her account of her victory over the Influenza Demon, the Mother is thus performing her Goddess function in the same tradition as texts like the *Chandi*.

Having enumerated both the internal and the external causes of illness, the Mother now comes to the cure. The body must be convinced that “it has been given the conditions under which it must be all right” so that “it takes the resolution that it must be all right and it is cured” (186). According to her, there are people “ill out of spite, there are people who are ill out of hate, there are people who are ill through despair,”



Goddess Durga fighting the Buffalo Demon, while the other celestials watch above.

Guler school, 18th Century; image is in the public domain, courtesy Wiki Commons

(186), so what is most important is to have a very high degree of self-awareness and scrutiny to find out which part of one’s body is actually open to or harbours illness. Once the disharmony has been discovered, “the first thing to do is to quieten oneself, bring peace, calm, relaxation, with a total confidence, in this little corner (not necessarily in the whole body) (186):

Afterwards you see what is the cause of the disorder. You look. Of course, there are many, but still you try to find out approximately the cause of this disorder, and through the pressure of light and knowledge and spiritual force you re-establish the harmony (186).

In more difficult or stubborn cases, the Mother says

you must add the Force of spiritual purification which is such an absolutely perfectly constructive force that nothing that's in the least destructive can survive there. If you have this Force at your disposal or if you can ask for it and get it, you direct it on the spot and the adverse force usually runs away immediately, for if it happens to be in the midst of this Force it gets dissolved, it disappears; for no force of disintegration can survive within this Force; therefore disintegration disappears and with it that also disappears. It can be changed into a constructive force, that is possible, or it may be simply dissolved and reduced to nothing. And with that not only is the illness cured, but all possibility of its return is also eliminated. You are cured of the illness once for all, it never comes back. (187–188)

Finally, the Mother implies that prevention is better than cure. To prevent disease, one must not allow it to affect one's physical body. In an earlier session of 16 June 1929, the Mother had explained that

To whatever cause an illness may be due, material or mental, external or internal, it must, before it can affect the physical body, touch another layer of the being that surrounds and protects it. This subtler layer is called in different teachings by various names—the etheric body, the nervous envelope.... All communications with the exterior world are made through this medium, and it is this that must be invaded and penetrated first before the body can be affected. If this envelope is absolutely strong and intact, you can go into places infested with the worst of diseases, even plague and cholera, and remain quite immune. It is a perfect protection against all possible attacks of illness.... (CWTM 3: 89)

But what is this "etheric body" or "nervous envelope"? It is

built up, on the one side, of a material basis, but rather of material conditions than of physical matter, on the other, of the vibrations of our psychological states. Peace and equanimity and confidence, faith in

health, undisturbed repose and cheerfulness and bright gladness constitute this element in it and give it strength and substance. It is a very sensitive medium with facile and quick reactions; it readily takes in all kinds of suggestions and these can rapidly change and almost remould its condition. A bad suggestion acts very strongly upon it; a good suggestion operates in the contrary sense with the same force. Depression and discouragement have a very adverse effect; they cut out holes in it, as it were, in its very stuff, render it weak and unresisting and open to hostile attacks an easy passage. (89)

Speaking more than thirty years later, on 27 January 1951, the Mother repeats her theory:

The vital body surrounds the physical body with a kind of envelope.... It is this which protects the body from all contagion, fatigue, exhaustion and even from accidents. Therefore if this envelope is wholly intact, it protects you from everything, but a little too strong an emotion, a little fatigue, some dissatisfaction or any shock whatsoever is sufficient to scratch it as it were and the slightest scratch allows any kind of intrusion. Medical science also now recognises that if you are in perfect vital equilibrium, you do not catch illness or in any case you have a kind of immunity from contagion. If you have this equilibrium, this inner harmony which keeps the envelope intact, it protects you from everything. There are people who lead quite an ordinary life, who know how to sleep as one should, eat as one should, and their nervous envelope is so intact that they pass through all dangers as though unconcerned. It is a capacity one can cultivate in oneself. If one becomes aware of the weak spot in one's envelope, a few minutes' concentration, a call to the force, an inner peace is sufficient for it to be all right, get cured, and for the untoward thing to vanish. (CWTM 4: 59)

To conclude this section, we may go to the Mother's message on 2nd July 1963 on the occasion of the inauguration of the Children's Dispensary in the Ashram:

As many cases
so many cures.

The most important thing in therapeutics is to teach the body to react properly and reject the illness. (CWTM 15: 171)

We might consider this as a superbly pithy summing up her whole theory.

To those familiar with the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, this approach to healing is based on a certain understanding of the human being as consisting of five levels of being: physical, vital, mental, psychic, and spiritual. Both health and disease are, thus, related to all these levels. Each of these levels, in turn, has all the other elements within it, thus making for a complex and multi-tiered ladder of consciousness. When it comes to healing, the Mother explains it as follows: “Each spot of the body is symbolical of an inner movement; there is there a world of subtle correspondences” (CWTM 3: 88). Such a notion has much in common with the ancient systems of the Cabala, neo-Platonism, alchemy, hermeticism, among others, which in turn, share a certain philosophical orientation not just with Ayurveda, but also with Tibetan and Chinese medicine.

Disease, as we commonly understand it, is a physical phenomenon. Therefore, my paper in most part is confined to the first two of the five levels. Yet, it should be remembered that health and healing are only a small part of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, whose aim is nothing short of the total transformation of the human being and of life on earth. In the last instance, even the conquest of death is a part of the agenda. First, human consciousness must be changed radically; then the body itself altered so that it becomes a fit vehicle. This process, called supramentalization, entails “the end of disease, suffering (of all kinds, including material suffering) and death (Pandey 279). Such ideas as physical transformation or the quest for immortality, though dismissed as myths by the modern mind, are prevalent in most traditions known to us. Indeed, as Richard S. Weiss’s recent book *Recipes for Immortality*, this quest continues to inform both the world view and practices of Siddha medicine in Tamil Nadu to this day. Mod-

ern medicine, too, is making rapid strides in not just the prolongation of life but also in genetic modifications which might eventually slow down the process of aging and possibly even overcome death. It would seem, then, that such diverse paths as alchemy, occultism, spirituality, and modern science are all interested alike in this problem.

In Indian mythology, there were basically two approaches in this quest, the *asuric* and the *yogic* (Pandey 263). In the first, there was an attempt, through severe askesis and austerities, to attain physical immortality without transforming the consciousness. The attempt was to enjoy unlimited power and pleasure. These attempts were often thwarted by the Gods, with the practitioner terminated after he had exceeded a certain boundary. On the other side, the yogis too tried to increase human freedom by seeking both physical and spiritual perfection. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s endeavour belong to the latter tradition. Modern science, with its body-centric and materialistic outlook, on the other hand, is closer to the *asuric* or demonic approach in that it is not concerned with ethics or alteration of the consciousness. Indeed, if we turn to science fiction for ways in which the future enhancement of human potential is imagined, then we are confronted with a hosts of monsters—cyborgs, terminators, robots, and all kinds of strange combinations of man and machine, usually waging endless wars against the precarious remnants of the human race.

According to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, death was a spiritual necessity at a certain stage in evolution. Without it, “imperfect forms would multiply ad infinitum as viruses and bacteria do” (Pandey 279). But when the consciousness of a species has been perfected, it will have no need to die. It would be a threat neither to itself nor to other species. Such a being would, in theory, have the “freedom to change the body consciously by an act of will without going through the process of death” (Pandey 280). The Mother has spoken extensively on what such a transformed and supramentalized body might be like. According to her, in traditions older than the Vedic and the Chaldean, there is

already a mention of a "glorious body" which would be plastic enough to be transformed at every moment by the deeper consciousness: it would express that consciousness, it would have no fixity of form. (quoted in Pandey 280)

The Mother wonders if there ever were such beings on earth, but asserts that "in a very small way there have been partial instances of one thing or another, examples which go to prove that it is possible" (quoted in Pandey 281). Based on these, she says that "one could go so far as to conceive of the replacement of material organs and their functioning as it now is, by centres of concentration of force and energy which would be receptive to the higher forces" (quoted in Pandey 281). She goes on to offer a preliminary description of what a supramentalized body might be like:

The supramental body which has to be brought into being here has four main attributes: lightness, adaptability, plasticity and luminosity. When the physical body is thoroughly divinised, it will feel as it were always walking on air, there will be no heaviness or tamas or unconsciousness in it. There will also be no end to its power of adaptability: in whatever conditions it is placed it will immediately be equal to the demands made upon it because its full consciousness will drive out all that inertia and incapacity which usually make Matter a drag to the Spirit. Supramental plasticity will enable it to stand the attack of every hostile force which strives to pierce it...Lastly, it will be turned into the stuff of light, each cell will radiate the supramental glory. Not only those who are developed enough to have their subtle sight open but the ordinary man too will be able to perceive this luminosity. It will be an evident fact to each and all, a permanent proof of the transformation which will convince even the most sceptical. (quoted in Pandey 282–283)

I have brought in these dimensions at the end of my paper because they are somewhat outside the scope of its main thrust, which are traditional systems of medicine and healing. However, we must remem-

ber that these systems are a total package in which healing is only a small part. To access only the latter is, perhaps, to do violence to the system. On the other hand, as modern people, we cannot go whole hog with some of these systems too because they stretch our capacity to suspend disbelief. Sometimes, it is hard to tell when something is plausible and when it tips over into the realm of the incredible and fantastic.

V Ashram Therapeutics and Ayurveda

Before closing, I would like to contextualize this narrative from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, locating it in broader traditions of complementary and alternate medicine. Such a move not only makes this account seem less outlandish or implausible, but also not altogether at variance with the premises of age-old healing systems, which have still not been banished from our midst or relegated to the dustbin of history. Indeed, considerable attention and importance has been paid even in the discipline of medical anthropology to what were termed "magico-religious" systems of health care. For instance, working on Japan, Margaret Lock (1980) makes a distinction between "East Asian medicine" based on traditional Chinese medicine and modern "cosmopolitan medicine" or contemporary Western-style bio-medicine. In addition, there is "folk medicine" which refers to the residual Shinto practices. In Aurobindo Ashram too, in addition to Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's use of occult "spiritual Force" to heal, there are modern medical practices, in addition to homeopathy clinics, naturopaths, Ayurvedic practitioners, and so on. The Ashram community and Auroville are busy hubs of several complementary, at times contending, healing systems. Together, they constitute a "holistic" or integral model of health care and healing.

My particular emphasis in this section, however, is on Ayurveda, the leading healing system to modern bio-medicine as far as India is concerned. According to some studies, nearly 80% of India's over 1.2 billion people still depend on Ayurveda. While many studies

have focussed on the dubious safety or toxicity of Ayurvedic medicines, especially those which are marketed through websites,¹⁰ my concern here is with its underlying philosophy of disease and healing. It is that which connects it with Aurobindonian narratives discussed here and with other complementary and alternative medical systems.

What, then, is Ayurveda?¹¹ Literally, it is a combination of two Sanskrit words, “ayush,” which means life, health, or well-being, and “veda,” which means knowledge, science, or guide. Together, the words may be taken to mean a total system for ensuring good health and long life; David Frawley, in *Ayurvedic Healing*, calls it “the science of life” (6). Ayurveda is India’s traditional medical system. It is perhaps the most extensive, continuous, and well-known system, but certainly not the only one. In the South, especially in Tamil Nadu, another system called Siddha is well established, going back, like Ayurveda, to mythical times. There are also other systems in use, for example, the Unani or the traditional Islamic medicine in India. Unani means Greek; so, presumably, this was a Arabic adaptation and development of the Greek system that also gave rise to modern medicine in the West. In addition, India has practitioners of Tibetan medicine, which shows influences of both Ayurveda and of Chinese medicine, and of Homeopathy, a comparatively recent import from the West. There are, moreover, many other kinds of non-standard, non-systematized healing systems such as Indian versions of shamanism, exorcism, not to mention several forms of New Age healing, and so on. All these systems coexist with modern medicine, which though dominant, has not been able to displace or destroy the other systems altogether.

One of the concerns of this paper has been how to mediate between these systems and practices and modern or “scientific” medicine. Certainly, in its stress on balance, prevention, and mind-body-spirit holism, the Aurobindo Ashram experiments in healing bear family resemblances with some of the alter-scientific traditional systems mentioned above. I say “alter-scientific” because I am excluding approaches to healing which are either non-systematic or lacking in sufficient scientific data. Some examples of the latter are

aromatherapy, gemology, reiki, pranic healing, shamanism, and so on. My focus has been on how the Ashram experiment related to the traditional systems with long histories of theory and practice on the one hand and with modern bio-medicine on the other.

In dealing with this question, I was confronted with a curious paradox. On the one hand we can find that in the West, especially in the US, there is a greater openness to “CAM,” on the other hand, in India, even the so-called CAM practitioners often prescribe allopathic medications. The prosperous elites in India reflect the alternative-seeking behaviour characteristic of developed countries. But, the situation with the vast majority of ordinary health care seekers is quite different. Here we witness a despiritualization of healing traditions, with vast numbers of the rural population being drawn to modern medical care; even practitioners of traditional medical systems are often found prescribing allopathic medicines. Thus, the Indian situation represents the emergence of reductionism within the holistic framework of traditional medicine, while the global situation shows the emergence of holism within the reductionist framework of modern medicine.

Clearly, the Ashram experiment explicitly focused on a form of “spiritual healing,” that is giving prominence to trans-physical aspects of the healing process. Similarly, all traditional systems of healing also do not disaggregate the trans-physical from the physical. That is to say, both disease and healing have to do with more than just our bodies. Of course, here, we encounter another difficulty. What do we actually mean by the word “body”? Modern medicine, no doubt, starts with the physical, but does not rule out the other dimensions of bodily existence, including the hormonal and neurological levels, which in lay language we might call emotional or mental states. Of course, hormones and the brain are also considered purely “physical.” They are the material mechanisms for mediating the effects of the mind. In other words, science is not closed to discovering more and more levels of the body and its consciousness, provided these fit into the picture of reality based on sensory perception. The traditional systems, on the other hand, do not start, and certainly do not end with the

body, mind or intellect. They see a person as really being a soul or a self, what in Sanskrit is called Atman. They also have a different psychology from modern medicine, actually positing not just the physical, but the subtle and the causal bodies. So what both sides mean by the “body” is by no means the same. Both, for instance, would like to work on the “body”—but the question is which body and where does it end? It would appear that for modern science all trans-physical entities and processes, including the mind and consciousness, are reducible to the body. Traditional healing practices, however, have much more complex metaphysical and ontological structures. To some, the non-corporeal entity, call it soul, psyche, or self, is more enduring than the body, even if not entirely independent of it. To others, the body actually appears in and to the self; that is the self is primary and antecedent to the body.¹²

If we consider Ayurveda as an example of the latter, we find that its entire outlook to well-being and disease is based on the notion of three biological humours, or *doshas*—*vata* (air), *pitta* (fire), and *kapha* (water). When these are out of harmony, we experience dis-ease. The unique insight of Ayurveda is that good health is our natural state because what we really are is the Atman, immortal and untrammelled. If so, embodiment itself is akin at worst to disease, or at best, to self-limitation. From an extreme, advaitic point of view, we are non-identical with our bodies. If we are not the body, then certainly we are not whatever happens to the body, including disease. Transcending the body in our consciousness, then, is a way of being ourselves, that is, being healthy.

Luckily, for those who are more bodily inclined, Ayurveda does not take such a position at all. It not only accepts embodiment but looks for the cause of disease in the disturbance of the natural equilibrium of the body. Ayurveda also treats the body with those substances, herbal or mineral, that are part of the same natural habitat and environment as the diseased body, thereby hoping through depletion or augmentation, to restore the harmony of the body within itself and with the rest of its surroundings. Ayurveda, however, does not stop with the body. It does not rule out other sources of both disease and therapy. The extra-physi-

cal or even cosmic forces, it believes, do impact us. So if we can propitiate or affect them in some way, we ought to. Yet, its concern is primarily with the body.

Ayurveda, like other traditional medical systems, sees the cosmos as a unity, made up of an elaborate structure of correspondences between the inner and the outer, between the human being and the world, between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The disequilibrium of one, in the strict sense, is also implicated in the disequilibrium of the rest. It is through and because of this connection or inter-relatedness that Ayurveda does not rule out therapies that claim to work on these extraneous elements. It is to this extent that astrology, psychology, or personal history comes into play in the therapeutic process. While taking all these factors into account, ultimately, Ayurveda’s principal focus remains on the body.

The theory of humours or bodily types, in some form or another, also seems common to all traditional systems regardless of geographical location. Similarly, the idea that disease is literally that – a lack of ease – caused by disturbance or disequilibrium inside the body appears to run through all traditional systems. The subtraction from or addition of substances to the body as a way to restore the balance, also obtains in all systems. Thus in both the cause and cure of disease, traditional systems seem to share a common philosophical foundation.

This suggests that there was one universal system of medicine all over the world, with its local variants and techniques, just as there is one universal modern system of medicine now, with its own local variants and techniques. If we consider Jean Gebser’s idea of “structures of consciousness,” then we could posit that each structure of consciousness has its own system of healing.¹³ Gebser identifies four such structures, archaic, magical, mythic, and mental, which is largely our present. But he does not stop there but goes on to aver that we are now in transition to the fifth structure which he calls integral. In the integral structure, the other four structures need not be rejected but can be retained or adapted for whatever they have to offer.

From such a perspective, shamanism would belong to the magic structure of consciousness while Ayurveda and the other traditional systems, with their

elaborate series of correspondences, to the mythic. After all, the humours are not meant to be taken literally but function as archetypes. They are a tool to help us understand different constitutions and temperaments. They are a tool to diagnosis and prescription, not some straitjacket or reductive framework. It is the modern mentality that reads them literally and thus renders them nonsensical. The non-literal and metaphorical mythical imagination does not resort to such analytical literal-mindedness or reductionism.

When we consider modern medicine, it, too, looks at a multiplicity of factors that might cause disease, though not quite in the same way or language as Ayurveda does:

...in the pathogenesis of disease, the resistance, immunity, age, and nutritional state of the person exposed, as well as virulence or toxicity of the agent and the level of exposure, all play a role.... ("Human Disease" 18–19)

From an Ayurvedic point of view, all these agents and causes lead to the disequilibrium that is disease. Again, let us consider the most widely used classifications of disease in modern medicine:

(1) topographic, by bodily region or system, (2) anatomic, by organ or tissue, (3) physiological, by function or effect, (4) pathological, by the nature of the disease process, (5) etiologic (causal), (6) juristic, by speed of advent of death, (7) epidemiological, and (8) statistical. Any single disease may fall within several of these classifications." ("Human Disease" 63)

Again, it seems to me that Ayurveda would have no trouble accepting these. Indeed, an increasing number of recent studies, such as Helle Johannessen and Imre Lázár's (see Works Cited) are trying to understand patients and healing processing both cross-culturally and holistically, taking into account modern bio-medicine alongside alternative, and traditional medical practices. What this means, at least to me, is that the two systems, the two epistemologies, the two worldviews are not entirely incompatible.

Conclusion

The integral and cross-cultural anthropology of healing that I have tried to develop here does not attempt to reconcile these differing worldviews such as the Ashram healing methods and Ayurveda on the one hand and modern bio-medicine on the other. Rather, the effort has been to understand them as structures of consciousness, even trying to integrate them in a greater domain of human cultural understanding. Integrality does not mean sinking into irrationality or myth-making; it simply means not accepting dominant boundaries of where valid knowledge stops and storytelling begins. That is why what I have attempted here is not reconciliation of incommensurables, but their juxtaposition so as to force a richer discursive terrain of sapience. One way to explain this is to make a plea for wisdom, not just reason. What this means actually is to recognize each structure for what it is – not just myth for myth and reason for reason, but also the possibility that myth may embody a form or reason and that reason may itself work in mythical way. Integrality recognizes that we are rational, but it also knows that we are not merely or entirely rational. Therefore, it also recognizes the archaic, magical, and mythic components of our being. Again, we need not take these labels literally; after all what is not rational is not necessarily irrational or infrarational. To be integral is to address all these, to take them into account as much as possible, and to bring to bear our knowledge of each of these in the process of healing is what the desideratum of narratives such as I have documented here seem to point towards. In the context of healing, more specifically, and of the science more generally, the science–spirituality dialogue might sometimes trigger unexpected insights. What seems both fruitful and imperative, at any rate, is the rediscovery of the ever-present integral whose plenary possibilities may have the power and intelligence to solve our problems and to rearrange the fragments that constitute our present limited and murky groping into lucidity or transparency.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international seminar on "Science and Spirituality in Healing," Coimbatore, 15-17 January 2008.

2 The word "Ashram" has now entered the English language. It signifies a religious retreat or spiritual community (see, for instance, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Ashram?db=dictionary>). Derived from the Sanskrit adnominal prefix *a* (near or close by) + *srama* (exertion, effort, in this case spiritual or religious). But more importantly, an Ashram is a place of spiritual instruction presided over by a Guru or teacher. In that sense, it is literally a Guru's home or establishment, where disciples gather around to learn, study, and grow spiritually.

3 For an excellent account of this unique spiritual community and its founders, see Georges van Vrekhem's *Beyond Man: The Life and Work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother*.

4 The term is attributed to Jacob Gruber who used it to describe the work of 19th century ethnographers attempting to document the languages, cultures, and world-views of indigenous peoples on the brink of extinction or extermination at the onslaught of colonialism and modernity.

5 I must clarify that what I mean by "integral healing" is somewhat different from what is meant by the compilers of this collection of the Mother's sayings. The latter simply calls the Mother's views on healing "integral" just as they call Sri Aurobindo's yoga "integral." Indeed, "integral" is used ubiquitously for the masters' ideas on most fields including education, psychology, sociology, and so on. If integral is a method peculiar to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, it really means "inclusive," that is taking into account all the levels of being and consciousness that they identified as constituting the human being. By integral in this paper, I mean a way of mediating between modern medicine and alternate therapies such as Ayurveda without rejecting or exclusively subscribing to either. How it proposes to combine, synthesize or mediate between them is, of course, subject for another paper.

6 Born November 17, 1903; died, 7:50 pm July 17, 2006, Pondicherry.

7 The pandemic of Spanish flu or influenza that is referred to began in March 1918 and lasted till June 1920. An estimated 50-100 million people died from it, making it one of the deadliest in human history. According to an article by A. Kawana and others in *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 23 million people in Japan were infected out of which 390,000 died.

8 See Thomas B. Coburn's *Encountering the Goddess: A translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

9 See vol. 25 of *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*. The full text, including Sri Aurobindo's identification of the Mother with the Divine Mother, is also available on the website http://intyoga.online.fr/text_idx.htm; accessed 21st February 2010.

10 See, for instance, "The use and safety of non-allopathic Indian medicines" by NJ Gogtay, et al in *Drug Safety: An International Journal of Medical Toxicology and Drug Experience*, 25.14 (2002):1005-19.

11 See *The Book of Ayurveda : A Holistic Approach to Health and Longevity* by Judith H. Morrison for a useful introduction.

12 For an excellent cross-cultural discussion of these issues, see Keith Ward's "The World as the Body of God: A Pantheistic Metaphor."

13 Jean Gebser's work, though still not widely known, represents a major departure from dominant modes of 20th century Western thought. See *Structures of Consciousness: The Genius of Jean Gebser* by George Fuerstein and my own forthcoming essay, "Nurturing Transparency: Globalization, Integrality, and Jean Gebser."

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