MIND AND BODY IN MEDICINE AND TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

SUSAN VEGORS
Maharishi International University

There is a growing body of literature on the effect of mental states on health. Anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, aggression, and introversion are the characteristics of the disease prone personality. Coronary heart disease, asthma, and ulcers are some of the diseases that have been linked to them (Friedman & Booth-Kewley, 1987). Many different treatments have been utilized to change these undesirable personality characteristics. In a review of 375 studies Ferguson (1981) found the Transcendental Meditation (TM) program to be especially effective in producing improvements in self-esteem and decreases in anxiety. This is one of the ways that TM influences health. By removing depression (Bloomfield, 1975), anxiety, anger and hostility (Subrahmanyam & Porkodi, 1980) and the negative characteristics of introversion (Wood, 1981) TM can remove the source of some of the problems that may damage health.

The TM program produces these health oriented changes by allowing the mind to relax to a state of deep silence, the least excited state of consciousness. When it does this, stress and fatigue are removed, and the mind is able to function more normally. A meta-analysis by Dillbeck and Orme Johnson (1987) showed that physiological factors normally associated with stress, such as basal Galvanic Skin Response (GSR), spontaneous GSR, respiration rate, heart rate, and plasma lactate, decreased significantly more in Transcendental Meditation than in eyes-closed rest.

Part of the importance of these findings lies in the theoretical context into which they are placed, in terms of the mind and body connection. Traditionally, mental phenomena are thought of as residing in the brain, and many of the major theories of consciousness look at activity in the neurons as the underlying basis of thought. However, in recent years it has become clear that the entire body produces and uses the same neuropeptides as the cells of the brain (Pert, Ruff, Weber, & Herkenham, 1985), forming an interconnecting circuit of information between the mind and body that flows parallel to the traditional nerve impulses. Furthermore, other researchers have noticed that the immune system is a major part of this mind/body web. These connections are being investigated in the recently emerging field of psychoneuroimmunology (Besedovsky & Sorkin, 1985).

Research on Transcendental Meditation points to an important link between the mind and the body. TM is an entirely mental technique that triggers a complex set of physiological changes in the body. The holistic nature of these changes is illustrated in
a study by Orme-Johnson (1987). He reviewed the medical care use by practitioners of the TM program and found about a 50% decrease in the number of reported diseases. Other studies (Wallace, Jacobe, & Harrington, 1982) have shown health improvements with regards to biological age in meditators.

If the mind and body are closely connected by a neurochemical link, then mental techniques should be measurable in terms of EEG and neurochemistry (see Wallace, 1986, or a review of this work). In order to understand the connection between the TM program and the body a theory of mind/body interaction has recently been introduced, called Maharishi Ayur-Ved (Chopra, 1990). This is Maharishi's interpretation of India's classic Ayur-Ved medicine.

A Systematic Theory of Mind-Body Interaction

Maharishi Ayur-Ved theory begins with a detailed description of the internal structures of the mind, and shows how these relate to similar components in the body, as well as to thoughts and feelings. It begins by looking at the mind in terms of three principle components of consciousness:

1) the knower or self,

2) the process by which that knower or self interacts with the external world, and

3) the structures that are being known.

These can be loosely connected with the psychological concept of the ego, the processes of thinking and perception, and the object of knowledge or the external environment. These structures in the mind are then related to their most similar quality in the body.

These three basic pathways or "doshas" connect to large areas of the physiology. "Vata" is the name given to the pathway that connects the knower element of consciousness with all the flows or movements in the physiology. Examples of these are: flow of thoughts through the nervous system; breathing; movement of food through the digestive system; muscle movement; and blood flow.

Since vata is connected with flow or change, the mental characteristics that tend to be expressed include changeability in moods and thoughts, quickness in learning and forgetting, and mental and physical activity that comes in bursts. The body also reflects dominance of these characteristics by means of a light, thin body build.
"Pitta" is the name given to the pathway that connects with transformation. In the mind it governs the processes of knowing. In the body, it governs a strong hunger and thirst, digestion, and all enzymatic and metabolic processes in the body. Since pitta is connected with transformation or digestion, the mental characteristics that tend to be expressed are a sharp intellect, highly enterprising personality, and precise action and thought. The body also reflects dominance of these characteristics by means of a medium body build.

"Kapha" is the name given to the pathway that connects with the object of knowledge, the external environment. In the body, this is the element most connected with tissue building. It also governs great physical strength, steady energy, tissue/body building processes, and a strong immune system. Since kapha is connected with tissue creation, the mental characteristics that tend to be expressed are relaxed, slowness in learning but with a good memory, and thinking things through carefully. Since kapha is the tissue building part of the physiology, the body also reflects this with a heavy body build.

These three qualities of consciousness connect mind and body through the principle of similarity. Tendencies in the mind link to similar tendencies in the body. For example, the tendency to be slow and methodical in thought tends to create the tendency to be slow in speech and action.

Maharishi Ayur-Ved theory is different from modern western theories of mind-body interaction in three ways:

1) It groups feelings, mental activity, and physical characteristics into three major categories that are based on their similarity. This is known as the Tridosha theory;

2) While it discusses a two way flow between the mind and body, the primary focus is on how the mind creates structures in the body; and

3) It shows detailed transformational mechanisms that connect the mind to the body. Many of these connecting links are currently being actively researched, in order to connect them with current biochemical and physiological knowledge.

One other important characteristic of Maharishi Ayur-Ved theory is that it discusses how these doshas can be balanced or imbalanced. Balance leads to perfect health, and imbalance leads to disease. For example, the mental characteristics
involving changeability can lead to desire for challenge in life, or it can lead a person to start things without finishing them.

This theory relates to the whole idea of holistic medicine by outlining details of a structure by which the mind can influence the body. When the doshas are in balance they are in balance in both mind and body. Any lack of balance in the mind is reflected in the body, and any imbalance in the body is reflected in the mind through these three channels. (See Table 1).

Maharishi Ayur-Ved theory contains a detailed description of how a mental technique, such as the TM program can create a host of physical changes in the body by resetting the basic relationship between the three aspects of consciousness. It is also detailed outline of how the mind and body interact to create health and disease.

Table 1

Comparisons of Balance and Imbalance in the Doshas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dosha</th>
<th>Characteristics of Balanced Dosha</th>
<th>Characteristics of Imbalanced Dosha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vata</strong></td>
<td>• Enthusiastic • Energetic quick to act • Imaginative • Happy • Mentally clear and alert</td>
<td>• Excitable • Irregular habits &amp; lifestyle • Fearful &amp; Anxious • Scanty, interrupted sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pitta</strong></td>
<td>• Intellectually focused • Precise in thought and action • Likes challenges • Good humored</td>
<td>• Intellectually critical • Easily angered • Hard driving (Type A personality) • Hostile • Tossing and turning in sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kapha</strong></td>
<td>• Steadily energetic • Relaxed</td>
<td>• Obese • Lethargic • Depressed • Difficulty in waking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, these doshas have been related to dream content and sleep quality. In terms of the latter, an imbalance in vata shows a scanty, interrupted sleep, in pitta shows lots of tossing and turning while in kapha shows an inability to get out of bed. On the other hand balanced vata includes lots of "awareness" with medium "awareness" manifest with a balanced pitta. Sleep is deep and long in a balanced kapha. According to this theory when vata is imbalanced, dream activity shows fear and running while a balanced vata manifests as flying, moving, and travel. Imbalance in pitta results in dreams with fire, anger, violence, and war while dreams full of activity and accomplishment is indicative of a balanced pitta. Finally imbalance in kapha is shown by dreams which are lethargic, while the presence of lots of water and romance indicate a balanced kapha.

Research is beginning on the Transcendental Meditation program relative to this new interpretation of India's classic Ayur-Ved medicine tying mind to body.

References


