

Illness as Punishment. “You have the flu? How did you get it?” The simple medical answer is: “I was attacked by a flu virus.” Ah yes, but what did you do that gave the virus the opportunity to attack you?

There is always a way to wring at least a little blame and guilt out of an illness. Perhaps you haven’t been eating well, taken the right vitamin supplements, kept your stress level down and your immune system up, or simply avoided others who have the flu.

It’s easy to extend the list of possible missteps in a spiritual direction: You’re sick? You must have done something to separate yourself from God, spirit, good karma, or the life-sustaining force of the universe, and now you’re paying the price. The link between misconduct and medical consequence is built into the very language we speak; words such as “blind” and “sick” not only describe a physical condition but also point metaphorically to wrong behavior. The word “ill” derives from the Middle English “ille,” meaning evil or wicked.

The association between illness and punishment exists in multiple languages and is deeply embedded in many of the world’s cultural and religious traditions. Judaism and Christianity, for example, commend kindness to those who suffer, but the sympathy is often compounded with disapproval. Torah, for example, links piety to health and links impiety to suffering and death: “If you do not obey the Lord, your God ... the Lord will strike you with consumption, fever, illnesses with burning fevers” (Deuteronomy 28:22). Jesus, following the healing he performed at Bethesda, remarks: “Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you” (John 5:14).



Peter Bruegel’s The Blind Leading the Blind illustrates the biblical link between blindness and sin, “If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” The figures here are represented as having medically identifiable eye diseases, ranging from cataracts to corneal leukemia. Invisible to these men is not only the church in the background but also the flourishing white iris in the ditch.

The Qur’an similarly asserts that human beings are responsible for their own misfortune: “Whatever of good befalls you, it is from Allah; and whatever of ill befalls you, it is from yourself.” (Qur’an, *Surah an-Nisa’ verse 79*) Some forms of Buddhism attribute sickness and suffering to unrighteous behavior in a past life or in this one: “Whatever is happening to us now mirrors our past karma.” (Sogyal Rinpoche)

A Non-Dualist Approach to Illness

None of these faith traditions attributes *all* illness to wrong thoughts or actions; the illness and poverty visited upon Job, for instance, are not caused by anything he has done, and God admonishes Job's friends for assuming that somehow he must be to blame for his own suffering. And, while it's easy to find religious texts that attribute illness to sinfulness and portray God as a punitive figure, there exists in these scriptures as well a counter-tradition that associates illness not with divine retribution, but with the inherent vulnerability of being human: our lives are fragile as blades of grass (Isaiah), and illness should be met with compassion and all the support we can give.



17th century European humanism (Spinoza, Grotius, Milton, Donne) called into question the age-old link between illness and wrong-doing. In Rembrandt's "Hundred Guilder Print" (1648), the artist represents those who seek to be healed as burdened by their illnesses, but not as morally flawed or wicked.

This counter-tradition provides a foundation for a non-dualist, integrative approach to health and healing that views the body in its wholeness and interconnection with all life. The human body is at once astonishingly resourceful and inherently vulnerable—and it is never “fallen,” alien, shameful, or mechanical. Perceiving human beings as embedded in nature, not as masters over it, unhinges the traditional Cartesian binaries of mind and body, self and other, health and sickness, reward and punishment. Mediation of these opposites becomes possible within a seamless reality that at once enables and constrains the scope of our actions.

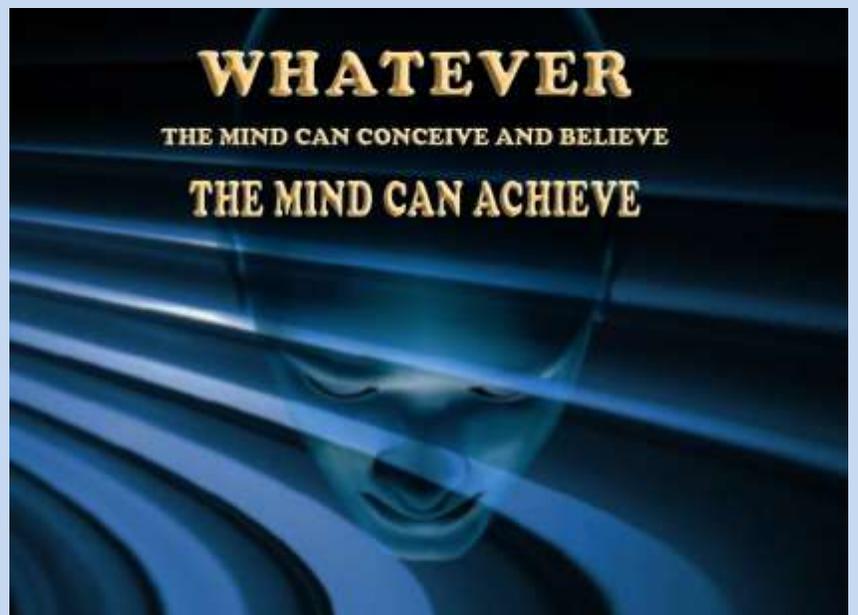
Buddhism may approach health and healing in this way, recognizing that aging and illness, like birth and growth, are integral to the human condition. Our bodies are subject to laws (“*niyama*” in Pali) of physical and biological determination that interact with, but are relatively independent of, human purpose, will, and action (karma). Illness, then, is not blameworthy any more than health is praiseworthy. Like the proverbial eddies in a river and passing clouds in the sky, we arise, reside in the world for a brief time, and then vanish. Yet we can make the most of that “brief time” and cherish this wonderful thing called life!

Illness as Personal Failure

People who are moderately healthy are apt to assume that in the normal course of their lives and, despite missteps here and there, they are doing their part, and life will continue to meet them halfway. When serious illness strikes, however, and this assumption collapses, our ability to respond in a thoughtful way may get trampled on by the way we feel inside, and we may imagine that somehow life/destiny has condemned and cast aside the one who has fallen ill.

Replacing the traditional dualism of spirit and flesh with a more unified view does not always lead to more charity and forgiveness, but can actually intensify negative self-judgment and guilt. For if body and mind are one, then does not a “fault” in the body signify a fault in the mind as well? Thus we arrive at a view not so far removed from the punitive ideas of the past: something is profoundly wrong with those who fall ill; removed from grace, they fall and fail.

The view of illness as punishment is reinforced within a culture that regards health and happiness as the inevitable outcomes of an optimistic frame of mind. Faith is packaged as a promise to overcome human limitation altogether and becomes, as it were, a magic carpet that sails over the human condition and conveys the believer to a land of boundless wealth and health. “We are Creators of the Universe,” proclaims life coach Kate Corbin, “Quantum Physics takes a spiritual perspective in which there are no separate parts, in which everything is fluid and always changing.... As we focus our thoughts on what we want to attract, we can literally call into existence whatever we desire.”



A valid insight – that we need not resign ourselves to the status quo but can hold out hope for fundamental personal and social transformation – may get twisted into a mirage of counterfeit expectations.

Such spiritual counsel is commercially successful, but how well does it work? Author and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich points out that the United States, homeland of the prosperity and happiness gospel, accounts for two-thirds of the global consumption of antidepressants and is ranked twenty-third among nations in self-reported happiness. “How can we be so surpassingly ‘positive’ in self-image,” Ehrenreich asks, “without being the world’s happiest and best off people?” In the United States, “land of opportunity,” neither mainstream nor New Age religion solves life’s problems for most people.

The flip side of proverbial American optimism is this country's repudiation of those who do not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Success rather than failure, health rather than illness, are thought to result from sincere effort and the right mindset. So being ill, like being poor, gets blamed on a failure of individual initiative.

Jimmie Holland, a psychiatrist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York quotes a patient: "I know I have to be positive all the time and that is the only way to cope with cancer – but it's so hard to do. I know that if I get sad, or scared or upset, I am making my tumor grow faster and I will have shortened my life."

Dr. Holland comments: "How did this phenomenon of blaming the patient for the disease come about? It undoubtedly is related to the fact that cancer has been a mystery for so long, as to both cause and cure. When we know little about something, we become even more frightened by it and develop myths to try to explain it ..."



Medical Science and Us

Over the past several centuries, we have brought many illnesses within the scope of medical science and have come up with effective remedies. So why would anyone today attempt to account for illness in terms of destiny or retribution? One reason is that so many chronic physical conditions still baffle the medical profession and leave patients feeling helpless. Viewing illness as a kind of punishment is one way of bringing it within the scope of explanation and possible control. We human beings are infinitely resourceful meaning-making machines, and if necessary we're willing to reach beyond the boundaries of medical science in pursuit of answers.

Moreover, the accounts of illness that medical science gives are, in a way, ultimately unsatisfying, because they don't adequately explain why a *particular* person falls ill. Suppose for example that my doctor tells me that I have an incurable cancer caused by a tumor whose growth is ravaging my body. That news just raises the next question: why have *I* been cursed with a body that falls prey to such ravaging? Even if my cancer was environmentally caused, I still don't understand why *my* body in particular has turned out to be so vulnerable to an environmental toxin. No matter how elaborate any explanation may be, it halts at the doorstep of the question: "Why me?" Wrestling with this question, the mind sometimes comes up with a facile answer such as "This was meant to be" or "Somehow, I deserve this."

The connections we make between illness, responsibility, and self-esteem are often conflicting, even tortured, ones. Understanding our own contributions to illness can, of course, help us find a way to get well. Sometimes these contributions are collective ones. For example, humans are poisoning the environment to the point that increasingly it endangers us—hence we "reap what we sow." Karma, understood as an account of *social* consequences, expresses the same insight. But when we regard ourselves individually as tainted or cast into a spiritual shadow, then our search for meaning is stretching beyond its plausible reach.

Mindfulness and Illness

When we fall seriously ill, we may yet retain (or discover!) a sense of gratitude for the body's healing power, for the health care we receive, for the company of those dear to us, for the wider world that sustains us all. On the other hand, illness can lead us to feel terribly alone, bereft of any sense of community, of protection from harm, even of a sense of continuity between today and tomorrow. Humbled, we take the hand of a beloved, walk along a beach, meditate in a cathedral, or play with a child. In choices like these (along with good health care) may lie our best support.

Going forward with our lives in this way does not signify resignation to a medical condition – or, for that matter, to any unacceptable situation in the world around us. Many *Tikkun* readers will be familiar with the famous first verse of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer,” written during World War II:

“Vast and life giving universe, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

Less well-known is the prayer’s second verse, adapted as follows:

Living one day at a time, taking,
as wise sages of old have, this fallen world
as it is, while acknowledging the distance
between this and our true potential,
may I be reasonably happy in this life,
within this mysterious cosmos,
abiding in this understanding
as long as consciousness allows.

Amen.



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