Wear Your Body Like a Sandal
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EDITORIAL

Wear Your Body Like a Sandal

India's wisdom decrees that worrying over-much about your health is simply not healthy

the Editor

Human malady is no trifling matter. suffering and death prowl daily in the village of mortality, and man, at once forceful and fragile, is ever vigilant to keep these twin beasts at bay. This month Hinduism Today explores America's very recent and very important discovery of India's healing arts. It is a timely acceptance that will undoubtedly bring more well-being to Americans, in addition to more cost-effective health care. The trouble is that Westerners live in body consciousness overmuch, identifying themselves almost exclusively with the physical. As scholar and ayurvedic teacher Vamadeva Shastri wrote me recently: "We in the West think too much about our bodies and try to physicalize everything, including the spiritual life. We have reduced yoga to asanas, its physical side, and tantra to sex. The Western mind tends to pursue yoga not out of renunciation, service or love of God, but as a new form of enjoyment (bhoga) and personal achievement. Unless we tell a Western audience how yoga will make them look better or feel better physically or mentally, they are not interested in it. There is something narcissistic about these attitudes. We are

conditioned to a life of entertainment and expect the spiritual life to be of the same order."

Our ancestors were also concerned about health and long life. In the early Vedic Samhitas we encounter their struggle with disintegration, disease and death, and affirmations of health. Listen to the Arthava Veda (xix, 60, 1-2): "May my voice remain strong, my breath unfaltering, my sight and my hearing acute! May my hair not turn gray nor my teeth become blackened, may my arms not grow feeble and slack! May my thighs remain sturdy, my legs swift to go, my feet neither stumble nor flag! May my limbs remain whole, each performing its function, may my soul remain ever unconquered!"

We in the 1990s are also engaged in a struggle for well-being, facing the dire reality of a power that seems to rob us of our health and then return for our life. Yet, in the Vedas man remains determined to face the menace, to struggle, and in the end to win. As Raimon Panikkar writes: "He has in his hand a medicinal herb, on his lips a sacred mantra, in his heart a burning hope, and in his mind an unflinching faith. He is well aware of the complex web of relations which crisscrosses the whole of reality, and he intends to intervene in order to restore any lost harmony and balance."

The oldest and foremost ayurvedic text, Charaka Samhita, affirms, "Ayu, life, is said to be the harmony of body, senses, mind and the indwelling Self." The old texts knew the secret of long and vigorous life--that we have to be balanced, have to live purely and simply in service to the Divine, have to stay in

touch with our innermost Self, the source of all our thoughts, our emotions, our organic systems. Illness is due to spiritual ignorance, not mere physical impairment, and the regaining of our native well-being is a spiritual exercise, not a surgical or chemical one. Still, there is one malady that everyone who survives to mid-life has to face: jara, decrease and old age. The Upanishads speak of this inevitability and teach us how to prepare spiritually for it.

Meanwhile, in mid-life, health remains a vital concern. Our monastic family on the garden island of Kauai has evolved a system you might find useful in your family. It is premised on the axiom that healing comes from within, not from outside us, and on the ideal of simplicity--avoiding excessive, intrusive and exhorbitant cures. We work each day on our health, thus forestalling illness. Whenever one among us is ill or injured, we follow a three-step strategy. First, efforts are directed at self-healing. This includes meditation, change of schedule, sleep and work, visualization (energy flows where awareness goes) and attentive care of one another. If self-healing proves ineffective, we move to step two: ayurveda. This brings changes in our diet and other balancing of the forces, in consultation with our ayurvedic doctor. Ninety-eight percent of all ailments will respond to these two natural steps. But for that last two percent, we willingly and thankfully turn to an allopathic doctor who looks after us all. While major injuries, cuts or infections may require skipping steps one and two, it is with the greatest reluctance that we would ever go under the surgeon's knife.

Instead, we find ways to live with life's little aches and pains, our flus and frailties, taking them as part of the natural order.

Our Paramaguru, Siva Yogaswami, urged followers to "Wear the body like a sandal." He meant that we don't fuss about our shoes. If they get scruffed or pierced, worn or ripped, we go on walking in them. Treating the body like a sandal, asking it to be functional and not fretting over every ouch and affliction is a spiritual practice that avoids the pampering of this temporary abode. It also brings healing in its wake and joy even in the midst of somatic maladies.

This week we saw a marvelous expression of this from an unexpected source. In a documentary on the mysteries of the universe, noted British physicist Stephen Hawking was interviewed. Prof. Hawking suffers from Lou Gehrig's disease, a life-threatening nerve disorder that impairs muscle use. It has twisted his body, paralyzed his limbs, destroyed his speech and left him bent helplessly in a wheelchair. Yet he endures, using a computer's voice to communicate his brilliant ideas to the world. Asked what he feels about his illness, he slowly typed these courageous words, "I try to lead as normal a life as possible, and not think about my condition, or regret the things it prevents me from doing, which are not that many." Here's a man who knows he is far more than his body, and who has risen above the gravest of disabilities. His life radiates the ideal of identifying with consciousness and shames those of us who routinely carp and complain about lesser infirmities.