Our unceasing and innate longing for health, happiness and wholeness is embodied in our continuing efforts to better our lives. Blessed with the therapies and remedies of modern science, informed by cross-cultural approaches to healing, and endowed with a unique and expansive human consciousness, we stand on the threshold of a new medicine, one that transcends our previous preoccupation with survival and longevity and beckons us to live our greatest potential. This is a noble challenge, one that we have been well prepared for. In Western culture the rituals of healing are learned early in life.

Our parents carry us to our first visit with the doctor. From then on, we progressively incorporate the values, practices, and customs of Western healing into day-to-day life. If we seek a broader view of health, we may choose to move beyond a symptom-oriented biological approach. We may explore health promotion strategies, develop new psychological understandings, practice mind/body skills, and consider alternative therapies. With these steps we extend our perspective, becoming more personally involved in the healing process. To go this far is itself a major achievement. Yet there are a rare few who will have the curiosity, courage and capacity to explore the farther reaches of health, the more subtle and profound aspects of inner healing.

The problem for most of us is that we stop too soon and settle for the conventional view of health. As individuals and as a culture, we become accustomed to having others take charge of our health, habituated to outer remedies—conventional and alternative—content with a very limited notion of health, and paralyzed by intellectual laziness. Conventional medicine is where we start and end. We may rearrange it, add to it and expand it, but we do not grow beyond it. We settle for the best our culture can offer. Our fate becomes one of an ordinary life, an ordinary health and a sedated soul.

To go further requires a broader view of health which honors both the inner and outer aspects of healing. From this more accurate and comprehensive perspective, it becomes apparent that all past and current approaches to healing were merely stepping stones toward a vision of optimal well-being and human flourishing that reflects our true potential. The key element in the maturation of our understanding and practice of health and well-being is the development and expansion of consciousness.

**The Development of Consciousness**
Through the continued development of consciousness, we have progressively grown in capacity from the primitive mind’s rudimentary efforts at survival to the magical, mythical, philosophical, theological and, finally, scientific approaches to healing. With each advancement in consciousness there has been a corresponding expansion of our healing capacities, freeing us from the limitations of the past and propelling us into the future. Past achievements were never abandoned. They were embraced, improved upon, and ultimately transcended. What at any one time appeared to be our highest level of achievement, when seen from a broader perspective, can be recognized as a further step in our movement toward a larger consciousness, life and health. And this includes scientific medicine.

The more primitive mind lacked our capacity for observation and analysis. Our ancestors used their close contact with nature to shape an empirical healing that largely relied on plants and other available natural remedies. Their ancient knowledge and practices continue to influence our modern-day pharmacopeia.

As consciousness further developed into what has been called “magical thinking,” amulets, incantations and other methods were added to healing. These shamanistic approaches persist today in the form of mind/body strategies, retreats and vision quests, and meditation and prayer.

The continued development of human consciousness gave rise to the philosophic mind and its systematic paradigms. Whether expressed as Hippocratic, Ayurvedic or Tibetan medicine, these philosophies shared the vision of a dynamic, self-balancing physiology encompassing body and mind. The corresponding approach to healing reflected this more complex and holistic perspective.

The development of the religious aspects of the mind emphasized the role of love, compassion and faith in the healing process. And finally, the 500 years of the modern era has led to the full application of our intellectual capacities to the development of a comprehensive scientific medicine.

With each leap in consciousness our approach to healing has shapeshifted. It has become larger in scope and more capable of realizing the fully evolved dream of health and healing. With each leap in consciousness there has been growth in our understanding and capacity that has both incorporated and yet gone beyond all previous approaches. Each new shift has resulted in a new mixture of inner and outer healing that was more effective and complete than
its predecessors. In each instance when the shapeshifting took place, fundamental change occurred—a larger mind, a larger consciousness, a larger life and a larger healing.

The last great leap in consciousness occurred when the philosopher René Descartes in the 17th century gave us the philosophic gift of “splitting” the mind into its spiritual and intellectual aspects, giving the former to the church and the latter to mankind. By unlinking the exploration of the physical universe from the domination of the spiritual perspectives of the church, he provided an acceptable social compromise that enabled the great scientists to fully develop the intellectual capacities of the mind in their quest to understand the workings of nature. From this evolved our current approach to healing—a modern, scientific, outer medicine. A larger consciousness, a larger medicine—albeit one limited by the reach of the physical senses.

The Modern Evolution of Health

Because evolution can be a bit of a messy business, the past 500 years has been dominated by the gifts of this leap in consciousness as well as its many limitations, which include the loss of self-reliance, the suppression of the inner dimensions of healing, and the richness of a more comprehensive view of health. We are now slowly moving toward the next level of development, a corrective response to the limiting perspectives and practices of an exclusively biological medicine.

In the past several decades we have begun to explore new ways to advance a more broad-based and comprehensive approach to health and healing. These initiatives have come in waves. They include: health promotion, wellness, mind/body healing, holism and the exploration of alternative therapies and healing systems. It is important to consider these one at a time so that we can understand the contributions of these efforts and also understand why they have each failed to fundamentally advance the great dream of healing. Only then can we direct ourselves toward the real issue, the key to the next great leap: a further growth in consciousness.

Health promotion and wellness can be taken together as they both refer to proactive, personal efforts to improve one’s health and wellbeing. The wellness movement has its origins in the work of Dr. John Travis in the 1970s. He envisioned a physical/psychological/spiritual process through which individuals would proactively engage in activities that would promote health rather than merely waiting until the onset of disease. In their original intent and form, wellness
and health promotion included a large scope of activities, including nutrition, physical fitness, smoking cessation, psychological exploration and, to a lesser extent, meditation. Its intention and vision were correct for the time.

As the wellness movement was popularized and taken up by traditional medical and corporate institutions, it was largely reduced to its most physical outer components: fitness, nutrition and smoking cessation. What was previously a broad-based vision became a narrow one made to fit into the outer view of modern science and medicine. The psychological and spiritual aspects of the wellness movement, its most significant inner contributions, were quickly jettisoned. When wellness hit the mainstream of modern medicine, it was changed. It became one more outer approach to healing, and as such, it was shaped by the prevailing viewpoint to conform to contemporary medicine. It contributed to an expansion of outer healing, but did not fundamentally change it or advance us toward the next level of healing.

Origins of the Mind/Body Movement

The mind/body movement resulted from the merging of several streams that came together at more or less the same time. In the 1950s Elmer Green, the founder of biofeedback, journeyed to India to study the great yogis and their capacity to reach profound levels of consciousness that were accompanied by a mastery over physiology previously unknown in the West. He sought to record the brain waves of these masters to see if Westerners could be trained to emulate these mental states and the physiological mastery that accompanied them.

In the same line of thought Herbert Benson, a researcher at the Thorndike Laboratories at Harvard, pioneered research on the physiological states attained by experienced meditators and developed the concept of the relaxation response, a technique to calm the mind. He also journeyed to the East to study the Tibetan practice of tumo, in which Tibetan monks were able to take sheets dipped in frozen water, wrap them around their unclothed bodies, and then dry them by mentally raising their body temperature. Each monk, situated in a freezing environment, dried one sheet after another. The physiology of this mastery of mind was accurately measured and recorded.
The next major contribution to mind/body medicine came from the developing scientific field of psychoneuroimmunology, in which researchers such as Robert Ader and Candace Pert began the effort of isolating the chemicals in the body, called neuropeptides, that were the interface between mental states and physiological states, the mind/body connection. More currently, exciting research in the neurosciences is now using sophisticated brain-wave measurements and functional MRIs to correlate states of consciousness with brain function. From these efforts arose the fields of biofeedback, relaxation therapy, visualization practices, and the popularization of other mind/body techniques such as yoga, aikido, and tai chi. The fate of these techniques was much the same as the fate of the wellness and health promotion initiatives. In the East the purpose of training the mind is to grow toward greater self-knowledge, an expansive heart, and an accurate understanding of reality that together free the mind and body from the root sources of stress, distress and suffering. This release from confusion and suffering leads to the progressive attainment of optimal well-being and human flourishing.

When incorporated into Western culture, these perspectives and practices were dramatically altered. Their original intent was the expansion of consciousness, inner development, freedom from suffering, and the promotion of optimal well-being. Unfortunately, their core essence was ignored and these rich and holistic approaches became another set of remedies for the many ailments of modern times. As with the wellness and health-promotion movements, when these mind/body approaches hit the mainstream, their intent and direction were changed to conform to the prevailing perspectives. They became treatments rather than steps to a larger consciousness and health. These mind/body approaches were and still are important contributions to expanding the scope of healing, but because they have not grown our consciousness they have not fundamentally shifted healing to its next stage of evolution.

Holism, as expressed in the philosophies of the East, refers to the inner experience of the oneness and unity of life that is directly and uninterruptedly experienced at higher levels of consciousness. Some of us have at times touched into a less developed form of this as a “peak peek” experience. In his book Holism and Evolution, written in the 1920s, Jan Smuts, a South African prime minister and self-made biologist, reduced and applied the larger spiritual experience of oneness into an idea about biology. He proposed that evolution occurs by the emergence in nature of increasingly larger and more complex wholes, each of which is a part of the next larger whole. For example, a cell is a whole that embraces and transcends its molecules in structure, function and capacity, and similarly it, itself, is a part of a larger whole, organs and organ systems.

George Engel, a noted physician, attempted to bring this vision into medicine in a way that highlighted the interdependence of all of life, from atom to consciousness to environment. He suggested that medicine consider all aspects of the human condition in its view of health and disease. Holism, as expressed by Smuts and Engel, was a theory about biology, as well as life.
It can be said that the perspectives of Smuts and Engel were reduced and materialized understandings of the larger vision of holism held in the East. Nevertheless, these were broad and expansive perspectives of the human condition.

When taken over by the medical and corporate community, holism, as a philosophy, was reduced to a marketing tool. We rearranged things a bit and created a “new” type of medical center or promoted a “new” type of healing practitioner whose singular innovation was gathering multiple physical outer-based healing techniques under one umbrella. These efforts were merely marketing tools that suggested something new when the truth was otherwise, simply a collection of techniques rather than a fundamental innovation. The transcendent vision of the East, the grand biological theory of Smuts, and its clinical expression in the writings of Engel were reconfigured to conform to the intractable view of an outer medicine. The principle of holism expanded our notion of healing, but it did not fundamentally change it or lead to the further development of our inner healing capacities.

Finally, there is the effort to explore and use alternative therapies such as Ayurveda, Chinese medicine, herbalism, and homeopathy. Not all of these approaches are the same. Some are broad-based psycho-spiritual perspectives that reach into the inner dimensions of healing, others are not. Some have been shown to have clinical effectiveness while others ride on the label of “alternative.” In either case, the result is the same.

When practitioners or advocates of these approaches seek social and cultural validation, licensure and recognition from the insurance industry and medical establishment, they sacrifice their rich inner essence of their traditions. The cost of “conventionalizing” the great healing traditions is to dilute and contort them into outer therapies, another set of tools done by a practitioner to a patient. No one can argue with the expanding approaches available to treat headaches, back pains and chronic disease provided by “alternative” therapies, but once again the expanding scope of outer healing has done nothing to bring us to a larger vision of health and healing. Alternative medicine, in its urgency to become part of the medical mainstream, has been reshaped and incorporated into modern medicine as one more medical “tool.”

Each of these efforts has been a well-intentioned attempt to deal with the limitations of an exclusively outer-focused healing that denies healing’s interior aspects. However, they have failed to create fundamental change. We have deceived ourselves. We have become entwined in a pervasive outer view that will defend itself in all ways and sabotage any of our efforts to leap toward a larger health. Our approach to healing has neither shifted shape nor form, nor evolved to a higher level. At best it has expanded the scope, the activities, and the number and type of practitioners and therapies.
A Post-Modern Integral Medicine

Author Ken Wilber defines this type of change—change that expands the scope and activities of outer healing—as horizontal change, in contrast to vertical change. Understanding the difference between these two types of change is essential if we are to grow toward a more comprehensive healing and gather the treasures of a far larger health. It is not for lack of right intention, but rather a result of our inability to grasp the difference between these two types of change that has kept us stuck where we are.

All our efforts to expand healing have been horizontal changes. They have expanded the scope of outer healing, providing better opportunities to therapeutically manage physical and gross psychological disturbances, adding comfort, ease and at times years to our lives. For this we must be grateful.

However, in the process of expanding the scope of outer healing, these efforts have also inadvertently served to lock it more in place, strengthen its dominance, and weaken efforts to change it. They do so because they provide the false hope that fundamental change is really occurring, and thus occupy some of our best minds and all our hopes for a larger healing in efforts that in the end will not lead to the expansion in consciousness that we need.

We, who must ultimately be the agents of change, remain with the same perspectives and the same level of consciousness, irrespective of our insistence that ourselves and our healing are changing. Horizontal change does not transform our sense of self. It does not change our consciousness, change our vision or capacities, affect the character of our healing, or take us toward a mature and comprehensive inner and outer healing. It only changes the tools that the old self and its consciousness use. If we look very closely at our medicine, most if not all of what we do is horizontal change—rearranging furniture in the same room and thinking that something has actually changed. Nothing can be more paralyzing than this delusion.

Vertical change is a shift or leap in consciousness to a new level of development and capacity—one that is deeper, broader and more whole than what preceded it. We gain a new set of eyes with which to see the possibility of a larger life and health. The shift from archaic, to magical, to mythical, to philosophical, to theological, to intellectual levels of mental development are examples of vertical shifts in consciousness that in each case went beyond what preceded it by radically enlarging our understanding of health and healing, making available to each of us far more of the human experience. These shifts did not expand “what is”—they transformed it.
These were momentous movements, individually and culturally, shifting the center of gravity from one level of consciousness and its outer forms to another. When our “self” has undergone change through a leap in consciousness, our understandings and worldly endeavors take on new and larger proportions.

Descriptions of vertical change can be found throughout the ages and across cultures, and these descriptions are quite similar. In his Republic, Plato describes them in his Parable of the Cave and his Simile of the Line. In the East they are expressed as the movements through the seven chakras, or the ten levels of bodhisattva training. More recently, Sri Aurobindo details these vertical shifts in great detail in his Integral Yoga and The Life Divine. And to this can be added Abraham Maslow, Erik Erickson, and the modern developmental psychologists. More recently, Ken Wilber extensively reviewed many such descriptions of vertical change in his books A Brief Theory of Everything and Sex, Spirit, and Ecology. In each instance these authors describe vertical change in a remarkably similar way. They describe it as a progression of consciousness, understanding and capacity from the most primitive and instinctual levels to the broadest spiritual perspectives.

It’s only through the eyes and capacities of a larger consciousness that we can know and hold both ways of healing—inner and outer—uniting them in the creation of a more expansive integral approach to healing that results in a profound health characterized by the attainment of human flourishing. To achieve this we must attempt the great leap now awaiting us, the next great journey in our life, and the shift toward a larger understanding and consciousness that can bring us toward our greatest potential.

The essential discovery is that the full development of our consciousness is the key to a radical shapeshifting of our perspectives and practices of health and healing. It is the doorway into the traditional dream of healing and its abundance of treasures. It is the essential ingredient of a larger life and health. It is this vertical shift, this movement into the center of our being, that is the true path to an uncommon health and human flourishing.

Our capacity for such a comprehensive health and healing relies on inner development. We can begin at any time, irrespective of the culture in which we are currently embedded. It is only through this personal effort that we can collectively foster the development of personal, institutional and cultural values that will support this new and more profound approach to health and healing. The changes begin when we understand and tenaciously pursue the authentic path to a comprehensive well-being of body, mind and spirit.
Shapeshifting: The Evolution of a Post-Modern Integral Medicine

Written by Elliott S. Dacher, M.D.
Friday, 01 March 2013 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 July 2013 15:00

This article appeared in Pathways to Family Wellness magazine, Issue #37.

View Article References

View Author Bio

To purchase this issue, Order Here.