

MENTAL DISEASES IN MODERN TIMES – A SPIRITUAL OUTLOOK

SWAMI TATTWAMAYANANDA

Sri Ramakrishna Math, Puranattukara P.O., Thrissur – 680 551, Kerala, India.

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ABSTRACT: *The ayurvedic view of the genesis of mental disorders is explained in this articles.*

Mental illness has become the most disturbing health problem in modern industrialized societies such as the United States, Britain, France, etc. It is especially disturbing to notice that mental diseases of various kinds are on the rise in those affluent countries where the concepts of social justice and welfare state have become a reality. It is said, for example, that one out of every four hospital beds in the United States is occupied by a person who is mentally ill. According to the reports of the American Hospital Association one out of four American is likely to suffer some serious mental illness that will necessitate hospitalization at least for some months.

The majority of psychiatric disorders in general practice are what are known as mood disorders, mostly anxiety and depression and, very often, mixed cases. In many cases these are accompanied by social maladjustments and other problems. In modern times, there are broadly speaking, five major categories of mental illness affecting the human mind, such as mental retardation, dementia, Psychoneurosis, Psychosis and various forms of character disorders. Among these, character disorders are closely linked to those social evils, which have become part of our urbanized life, namely alcoholism, gambling and drug addiction.

History of mental diseases shows that a large number of modern abnormalities developed as a result of rapid industrialization and economic growth. Though the extent to which social factors are responsible for mental illnesses is still debatable, the consequent dehumanization of life has produced certain special problems peculiar to our times. Mechanization of day-to-day life has made it more comfortable, pleasant and easier, but little more than a drudgery. Emotions and genuine feelings, have lost their place in human relationship. Modernisation has upset the natural rhythm of our life and the rise in abnormal diseases is one of the inevitable consequences of overurbanisation. The modern man is always in a hurry and he has not time for ancient spiritual values. He has no time to pause and think and contemplate over those higher ethical values which shaped cultured and civilization over the centuries. The result anxiety and stress, broken homes, wandering aimless young men and women and an ever-increasing number of schizophrenics.

Psychology in India developed into a science while studying the methods to attain the ultimate spiritual goal of life, namely a fully integrated personality, 'Samaddhi', as it is called in Yogasastra. The ancient sages developed a highly rational and scientific method to control the human mind to reach the super-conscious state. The Bhagavat

Gita can be considered as an excellent work on Applied Psychology. Similarly, the Sankhya and the Yoga systems of thought analyse the human mind and its functions in highly scientific manner. Many of our ancient philosophical works contain psychologist as singularly modern and rational. The greatest of ancient psychologist was patanjali, considered to be the father of Indian Psychology. Thousands of years before the very concept of the study of human mind originated in the West, this great thinker and yogi made a thoroughly systematic research work to unveil the mysteries of the human mind.

MIND IN INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Psychologists of ancient India can be divided into three groups depending on their concepts of human mind. One group held the view that mind is a subtle substance of transparent nature possessing a medium size. Its pliable nature allows it to undergo modifications including change in appearance according to the object it takes. Thus, it is capable of expansion and contraction. The Sankhya, patanjala and Vedanta systems belong to this first group. Another group of ancient psychologists thought that mind was only mechanical instrument of atomic size which connects the knower and the sense-organs, thus producing knowledge. According to the third group of ancient Indian Psychologist, it is the self as pure consciousness that assumes limitations or modifications so as to manifest as the mind. This school considers mind to be a form of consciousness itself.

The Indian, Psychologists clearly distinguished mind from soul and never confused the one for the other. According to them, mind is an inner instrument belonging to the soul as an aid to knowledge, enjoyment etc. Even the last-mentioned

group of Psychologists (Which includes the Sakta Agamas, Yoga Vasishtha Philosophy, and the pratyabhijna Saiva school) which consider mind as an instrument.

Among the various schools of Indian psychological thought, the Patanjala school deserves special consideration because it was perhaps the boldest and the most scientific and the most rational attempt in the field of Applied Psychology in the ancient world.

The 'mahat' of the Sankhyas becomes 'chitta' in the Yoga system of Patanjali and is taken in a very comprehensive sense. As such, it includes intellect, self-conscience and mind. In his commentary 'Tattwavaisharadi' on the yoga Sutras Vahaspathi says that the term Chitta and Antakarma denotes buddhi. Chitta is subject to changes according to the predominance of one of the three gunas namely, satwa, rajas and tamas. By its own nature Chitta has no consciousness. It is jada or unconsciousness. It becomes conscious by the reflection of the selfish abides by it. The self knows about the external world through the modifications of Chitta or mind. The Yoga Psychologists say that there are five kinds of mental modifications or Chittavrittis namely pramana or true type cognition, viparaya or false cognition, vikalpa or merely verbal cognition, nidra or sleep and smirity or memory. The self's bondage is due to its identification with mental modifications. So liberations requires their cessation. That is why Yoga is defined as Yogas "cittavrdhhi nirodh". Our mind is an arena of conflicting forces which requires to subdued to some unity. According to the Yoga psychology, the obstacles to concentration are also the real causes of misconception and various kinds of hallucinations and illusions. They are

ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion and tendency to cling to life at any cost.

Yaska gives the etymological meaning of mind as the 'Thinking Principle'. We find descriptions of mind in the Rigveda such as "Mano japistha", "Jyothi Hridaya" etc. The texts of Ayurveda describe the functions of the human mind in various ways. According to 'Charaka', 'manas' is an organ having presences as well as absence of cognition or knowledge. It also states, the functions of manas are the guidance and control of the senses, control of itself, reasoning and deliberations. In the Rigveda (Mandala-10) and Krishna Yajurveda Taittiriya Aranyaka (3-12-13) we find references to mind. The Purushasukta says "Chandrama manso jatah", is described as the origin of the moon.

MENTAL DISEASES IN MODERN WORLD : *Therapeutic importance of Religion and Spirituality*

With the emergence of the concept of 'Psychosomatic medicine' it is now generally agreed that diseases are not merely caused by physical factors and that mental factors are also involved. Most of modern psychosomatic and emotional disorders seem to have their origin in anxiety and stress.

Anxiety ultimately originates from over-ambition and unhealthy competition which have now become essential factors necessary for success of life. A large number of mental diseases are directly or indirectly connected to these mood disorders. It is well known that normal and abnormal moods lie at opposite continuum. The difference between normal and abnormal (neurotic) anxiety is quantitative and never qualitative, a difference of degree rather of kind. The symptoms of anxiety are

normally grouped under three headings namely, psychological, physical and behavioral. Several cases of tension, fear, panic and phobic anxiety can be effectively treated by training the patients in prayer. Though this may sound a bit far-fetched it is a known fact that the habit of systematic prayer develops into an attitude of resignation to a higher power, and gradually the patient may feel that a heavy burden is lifted off his shoulders.

At the initial stages of mood disorders, patients must be trained in prayer. Though a clear distinction is made between anxiety and depression in modern psychiatry, patients do not normally see this distinction. At the initial stages the causes of both anxiety and depression may be the same. The major symptoms are a feeling of unease and apprehension that may be described as anxiety, tension, fear or panic. Systematic prayer gradually lessens the tension and slowly the patient will be able to feel an inner peace and tranquility.

All religious prophets of the past believed in the efficacy of prayer. Thanks giving or begging for a petty material benefit should not be considered as genuine prayer. Jesus says : 'Come unto me, all ye, that labour and are heavy laden, I will give you rest'. (St. John-XI-28). Similarly, Lord Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita : 'Giving up all the formalities of religion, come to Me, take refuge with Me, fix thy mind on Me, be devoted to Me, worship Me, adore Me, I shall make you free from all sins'. Similar statements can be found in all world scriptures. They provide extensive source for psychological counseling and therapy. Patients suffering from anxiety neurosis and depression can get a lot of benefit by getting acquainted with such statements.

Sincere prayer is always accompanied by a feeling of inner peace and tranquility and helps in bringing down the anxiety level considerably. It has a soothing effect on the nervous system. Whether a patient is a believer or not, regular attendance in any religious ceremony, irrespective of his religion can automatically regulate the way of thinking and can have a positive effect on the mind. Since many of the physical disorders have their origin in mental conflicts, by regulating the functions of the body, mental conflict can be reduced. This method is recommended by many modern exponents of Yogic Asans who combine who combine breathing techniques and meditation to help patients.

The doctrine of Karmayoga or the philosophy of selfless action as propounded in the Bhagavad Gita can be a very effective antidote in reducing anxiety are very often the results of a restless and over-competitive life-style. The fear of losing jobs, of not getting promotion, lack of financial security etc are creating an environment in which man naturally becomes anxious for his future. Without bothering to teach high philosophy people at large should be trained to work and live in a detached mood. Patients at the initial stages of anxiety can be taught to practice non-identification with the results of their duties, but at the same time with complete dedication and concentration. This may ultimately help in cultivating an attitude of resignation. Of course, special care should be taken to avoid the development of attitude of callousness and indifference. Whenever a patient is found displaying those physical symptoms such as emotional distress, unsophisticated behaviors (symptoms of depression) etc he should be trained his duties. This may be also effective in reducing the cognitive symptoms (relating to thought) in a patient suffering from depression.

There is a touching story of an American preacher in India who was afflicted by a crippling physical ailment that threatened to put an end to his evangelistic career. He worked for several years in the Central Provinces before the independence. His diseases necessitated his occasional withdrawal to hill resorts in the Himalayas which naturally created many problems in his preaching profession. At last, the doctors advised him to return to the United States for good if he did not want to risk his life. He spend sleepless days and nights, praying and contemplating. One night, as a last resort, he prayed to God, "O Lord, my ill-health would not permit me to continue doing work here for I have to return to United States". Then, so the story goes, he thought he heard a voice telling him, "Give your whole burden over to me; if you do so, I shall see that you recover your health soon". The clergyman though for some time and said, "Lord, I close my bargain here and now". Immediately he felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted off his shoulders. He continued doing missionary work in India for two decades more and left the country only in the late sixties.

Though the story concerns a mentally healthy man, yet the principle is applicable to even abnormal personalities suffering from anxiety and depression during their initial stages. William James writes in his "The Varieties of Religious Experience": "Through prayer the purpose, often far from obvious, come home to them, and if it be a 'trial', strength to endure the trial is given". Again "The fundamental religion point is that, in prayer, spiritual energy, which otherwise would slumber, does becomes active, and spiritual work of some kind is effected really". The same principle, with some modifications can be applied in the

prevention and cure of certain psychological problems.

Professor George Brown and his colleagues who have carried out a number of surveys on depressed persons have identified three vulnerability factors which render a person to greater risks of becoming depressed. (ref. : “Social Origins of Depression” : G. Brown & T. Harris). They are : (a) Absence of any confiding relationship (b) The absence of a job (c) Absence of any creative ideal for life.

Even those who are forced to live a lonely and secluded life in urban areas can find religious scriptures as an effective source of creative ideas and ideal characters. In a backward rural society like ours we can find that great ideal men and women characters of our epics and Puranas have played a very important role in building the national character. In the Ramayana, for example we find the very epitome of womanly virtues in the character of Sita and an equally great character in the form of Rama. Western scholars have wondered how such great characters that had been conceived several centuries before Jesus Christ could exercise such a tremendous influence in the psyche of the nation. Hindu religious practices of meditation, contemplation etc have tremendous potential as sources of new methods and ideas in counseling and therapy. Above all, a person who reads noble books unconsciously develops certain high ideas and ideals that prevents anxiety and depression unless the hereditary and genetic factors are very strong.

Freud suggested that there was a link between the experience of a loss (of job relative due to death opportunity etc.) and depression. There is also evidence to show that it is how the event is perceived rather than the event itself that matters. In modern psychiatry we do not insist that the

psychoanalyst himself must be a perfectly healthy person (mentally). In our spiritual tradition, including prayer and meditation we insist that everything should be practiced under the direct guidance of a master (Guru). Similarly, the person who treats a patient should also be a man of perfect equilibrium, with an integrated mind. Then only he would be able to give the patient the proper help by introducing him to the sublime ideals of religion and spirituality.

The story of saint poonthanam shows how a man of deep religious feelings could sublimate his grief over the loss of his only son into sublime spirituality. In fact, it was the death of his only son that transformed him into a saint. Many ordinary people would have become victims of depression if a similar tragedy had occurred to them. Many of the great industrialists and philanthropists of the United States were men who could sublimate their grief into creative force and noble aspirations. Some of the greatest saints and philosophers of ancient India had a dubious past. They became great sages by transforming their life, inspired by our spiritual books.

The story of the Bhagavad Gita revolves round a depressed character in the form of Arjuna. When we read the first chapter we feel we are listening to the pitiful utterances of a patient suffering from depression. The entire 17 chapters from the 2nd to the 18th constitute an excellent psychological study of the human mind. The philosophy of selfless action (karma yoga), the Bhaktiyoga, the Rajayoga etc are superb psychological methods to overcome doubt, anxiety, depression, illusion, etc.

One of the most prevalent mental diseases in modern industrialized societies is schizophrenia. It is the most severe of the non-organic psychiatric disorders and

despite advanced methods of treatment and rehabilitation, it remains a major source of distress and social disablement. Broadly speaking, there are 3 types of symptoms in schizophrenia :

- (a) Auditory hallucinations of certain kinds, including hearing voices. (In ancient Indian Psychology all illusions, delusions and hallucinations are called 'Tamas', a synonym of one of the 5 viparyayas.
- (b) Primary delusions – False beliefs
- (c) Passivity experiences : Feeling of external forces interfering with one's thought, behaviour and other functions.

Apart from those mentioned above, a schizophrenic may also show symptoms such as apathy, lack of energy, drive, motivation, under-activity, slowness of thought, poverty of speech, social withdrawal together called 'Clinical poverty syndrome'.

It must be admitted that religion cannot offer any thoroughly successful curative method in the advanced cases of schizophrenia. But history tells us that so long as certain values were enforced upon society by established religions, that is, before the advent of the modern scientific and industrial civilization cases of schizophrenia were much rarer than they are today. It was not long ago that a renowned psychologist observed: "It is almost impossible for a God-fearing man to be a schizophrenic". By introducing certain values of moral life in educational system people can be taught to think with a positive mind. With the onset of modern urbanized life-styles, the old ethical values that were enforced by established religions have all but disappeared.

Science and technology could not offer anything in place of the lost spiritual values. Modern social phenomena such as hippism, anarchism etc are the products of a spiritually orphaned culture.

Faith in God can prevent the formation of illusions of grandeur and persecution (commonly found in schizophrenia). We can observe the difference between fear in a normal person and phobia associated with abnormal behaviour. In the past, many of the complicated forms of schizophrenia that are prevalent in modern society were non-existent. Some of these are exclusively caused by a sense of social insecurity, emotional emptiness, artificial mode of living, worry, anxiety, hard competition, failure in job and unnatural food.

Let us see how faith works in preventing formation of illusions and doubt. A man who believes that he is safe in the hands of a superior spiritual Being (be it Krishna or Christ) naturally has less chance to become suspicious because he develops a strong self-confidence and will-power. His sense of security will prevent the formation of ideas of doubt and hostility from others. Therefore, if we could train children who may turn schizophrenic (due to genetic or hereditary factors) in certain religious belief and convictions, including faith in benevolent God, the possibility can be considerably reduced.

A very important area of abnormal behaviour where spiritual values can play a constructive role is drug-addiction. Modern psychologists have discovered methods to treat a drug-addict. But after having succeeded in turning the addict away from drugs, if he is left there, there is possibility of his returning to drugs. This is where religion has a creative role to play. Young

men should be taught why it is bad and sinful to take drugs. The only reason that the ordinary psychologist or social reformer can give is that it is unhealthy and may even result in his death and that he can become a nuisance and a burden to his family and the society. But religion goes even beyond that and tells him that there are higher ideals and principles that transcend the interests of his family and society and that these are the spiritual values that fundamentally distinguish man from animal. Faith in a personal God may be left to his choice, as this may not appeal to many modern rationalists.

Religious values can be a preventive force in fighting the problem of juvenile delinquency as well. It can be stated without doubt that a young man who has received some kind of religious education has less chance of becoming a drug addict, a gambler or a criminal. Similarly, in the cases of disorders among elderly persons (e.g.: senile dementia, multiinfarct dementia etc) also spiritual ideals can play a very meaningful role both at the preventive as well as curative stages. A fixed ideal and a regular pattern of living can slow down the decay and can keep body and mind vigorous and strong.

The American Foundation of Religion and Psychiatry is a well known New York Clinic that has effectively combined psychiatry and religion in treating mental diseases. It is completely non-sectarian, staffed by the followers of all religions, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. The clinic's atmosphere is homely, informal and relaxed. The people who seek help there are not called patients but 'clients'. The vast majority of the clients are normal people who find themselves in some crisis or other, often suffering from varying degrees of depression. Without formally preaching

religion, the Foundation's counselors impress upon the clients that the key to successful in the area of guilt feelings. Counselors freely make use of religious scriptures such as the Bible. The clinic's success has shown how religion and psychiatry can join hands to achieve results impossible to either alone.

YAMA AND NIYAMA : THEIR THERAPEUTIC ROLE IN TREATING MENTAL DISEASES:

Socrates once said: "Men were foolish to try to heal the body without healing the soul. Soul is the mind and is the source. Soul makes the body. Soul the cause; body, the effect". An unhealthy mind cannot exist on a healthy body. Mental functions have always their correspondence effect on the body and vice versa. This is true of any ordinary man. Only a spiritually advanced soul who can mentally detach himself from his body can transcend this common rule. For the common man, the saying 'there is no psychosis without neurosis' is perfectly true. For him there can be no mental change without a corresponding change in his nervous state. If a man always thinks of material objects his mind descends to the plane of matter and consequently his mind also degenerates and this causes abnormal state of mind. Our ancient Rishis turned their concentration inward and through their introspection analysed the state and the functions of the human mind. As a result, a highly intricate science of spiritual psychology evolved. It is called the science of Raja Yoga. As mentioned earlier, it forms the most elaborate, scientific and rational attempt to study and analyse the mind in all its aspects with a view to reach the supreme spiritual goal of life.

The science of Raja Yoga has put before the world a practical, rational and scientifically

worked out method of reaching the ultimate goal, namely spiritual perfection in this very life, by completely controlling our mind. In this process, it has analysed the various problems of the mind and has discovered certain basic principles which, if properly practiced, can prevent many of the well-known abnormalities and help us develop a perfectly healthy mind. Though healthy mindedness is not the only goal of Indian psychology, yet it is an essential ingredients in our spiritual tradition.

Here it may be observed that the concept of healthy mind in Indian Psychology is different from the same in the western Psychology. A mentally healthy person in Indian spiritual tradition is one who is not easily disturbed in mind, one who looks at pain and pleasure with an even mind and one who has attained an equanimity of mind and attitude towards life. The Bhagavad Gita calls such a mentally healthy person by four different names, namely, Yogi, Bhakta, Sthitapranja and Gunatita. It may be interesting to compare this grand idea of mental health with what William James says: "Systematic healthy-mindedness, conceiving good as the essential and universal aspect of living, deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision". (W. James: "The Varieties of Religious Experience"). In the 12th Chapter of the Bhagawad Gita Lord Krishna describes the attitude of a devotee of God (who naturally must be a man of perfect mental health and equanimity) as a person who is not perturbed by abuse or delighted by praise (always silent) and one who looks at pain and pleasure with an equal mind. The teacher of the Bhagavad Gita himself, who is said to have neither wept, cried or hesitated was the very embodiment of perfect mental health.

The practice of Yama and Niyama which constitute the initial stages on mind control in Raja Yoga can be very helpful in cultivating a healthy mind and preventing those distractions and perversions which in later years may develop into various kinds of mental abnormalities. Yama includes non-killing, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence and non-receiving.

Here, the first three principles deserve special attention. It is commonly found that evil thoughts and evil deeds create disturbance in the mind and gradually impressions or vasanās are formed which prompt us to do evil deeds. Many of the criminal tendencies of hardened criminals and psychopaths are due to the negative and harmful impressions they gather during their young age. By introducing the virtues of non-stealing in our educational system, it is possible to eradicate criminal tendencies in young age. To a limited extent even hardened criminals can be converted by teaching such ideals in prisons and rehabilitation homes.

Niyama consists of purity, contentment, mortification, study of good books and worship of God. These virtues, if developed and practiced even to a limited extent, will be helpful in cultivating a healthy and optimistic attitude towards life, especially among patients suffering from depression and melancholia in their initial stages. Children of such patients should be systematically educated in these ideals to avoid the recurrence of such problems in future.

Yoga psychologists have identified 9 forms of mental distractions that can obstruct the path of a Yogi. They are disease, mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, lethargy, clinging to sense-enjoyments, false perception, non-attaining concentration and

falling away from the state of perfection when obtained. Sayan, Samsaya and alasya are common among those suffering from depression, melancholia and schizophrenia. Bharatidarsanam and Alabdhabhumikatwam are common among schizophrenia. Bhrantidarsanam and Alabdhabhumikatwam are common among schizophrenics and those suffering from various complexes and obsessions. Indian psychologists argue that stress, anxiety and grief can be reduced by developing the power of concentration because they are the results of non-retention of concentration. By meditation on the heart of a holy person who has given up all attachment to sense objects or on the effulgent light which is beyond all sorrow one can get rid of many of these 'Antharayas'. Positive ideas, if introduced during the formative years, have a tremendous impact on character formation and can help in developing a healthy mind and a healthy attitude towards life.

The Bhagawad Gita gives a highly systematic analysis of how a perfectly normal person becomes abnormal due to over-ambition and attachment to the objects of pleasure.

“Attachment to objects, is born when one ponders on them. Of attachment is born desire, and of desire, wrath”. “From wrath arises delusion; from delusion, failure of memory. Due to this latter intelligence perishes, and from its loss, total destruction ensues”.

Bhagavad Gita – II – 62, 63.

Patanjali suggests a practical way to fight negative thoughts and ideas that may ultimately lead to the development of delusions. To obstruct negative thoughts one should bring in contrary thoughts. For instance, when a big wave of anger has

come to the mind, we should neutralize it by raising an opposing wave of thought. This principle can be applied in psychiatry and counseling and can be effectively used in developing the capacity for auto-suggestion.

Conflict arises mostly due to incompatibility or a struggle between a painful experience acting as a complex and the personality. The state of conflict is characterized by a condition of unpleasant emotional tension. The individual feels himself torn between two opposing lines of conduct, neither of which is possible on account of the resistance offered by the other. Conflict involves a lot of emotional tension and accompanying indecision and paralysis of action. Its possibility of occurrence can be considered reduced if the individual can mentally detach himself from the consequences of his actions and painful experiences. Over-identification with some painful experience is an important cause of conflict and anxiety. The principle of mental detachment from the fruits of our actions as taught in the Bhagawad Gita can be applied as a preventive factor in conflicts, anxiety and tension at the initial stage.

Along with this one may also be trained in practice of meditation. Meditation is a deeply restful mental exercise. Experiments have shown that, during meditation blood pressure drops, skin resistance to electricity increases and lactate concentration in the blood declines, all demonstrating a lowering of anxiety level. Besides, laboratory tests have clearly demonstrated that meditation has the following effects on the body and the mind:-

- (a) It decreases oxygen consumption (this shows relaxation and more efficient respiration).

- (b) It relaxes the sympathetic nervous system, resulting in lower levels of 'stress hormones' adrenaline and noradrenalin.
- (c) It shows down brain rhythms to the alpha level, indicating relaxed awareness and absence of stress.
- (d) It shows down the heart-rate.
- (e) It decreases carbon dioxide production.

All these factors combined bring down the level of tension, anxiety, conflict and stress in a patient.

There is an episode in the epic Ramayana where Rama confronts a conflict-situation with a sense of equanimity of mind rarely found in any other character. Rama was informed that he would be installed, the following day, on the throne of Ayodhya as the successor of king Dasaradha. But the ceremony was cancelled the next day and he was asked to go to the forest and stay there

for 14 years leaving the kingship to the younger brother Bharatha. The poet says that the splendour of Sri Rama's lotus like face neither grew brighter at the prospect of becoming the king, nor was it dimmed at the painful fate of leaving the forest.

Such stories and episodes from epics and other religious scriptures are excellent psychological education for the growing generation.

According to Hindu philosophy, the subtle elements of food stuff constitute the mind while the gross elements build up the body. Therefore, by controlling and regulating what we eat and drink we can build up a healthy mind. If modern medical practitioners and psychiatrists insist on pure food, preferably vegetarian, they can improve both the mental as well as physical health conditions of patients. What is required is a scientific and pragmatic approach towards religion and a willingness to apply the teachings of our spiritual heritage in treating mental diseases.