Ayurveda and mind-body healing: Legitimizing strategies in the autobiographical writing of Deepak Chopra

Maya Warrier

Abstract: *This paper explores the early autobiographical work of the popular health and well-being guru, Deepak Chopra. The autobiography (entitled* Return of the Rishi*) is Chopra's account of his early forays into meditation and ayurveda, the Indian health tradition. It is the story of his 'spiritual transformation', and his development into a proficient ayurvedic healer. Following the lead of his one-time guru and mentor, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Chopra represents ayurveda as 'consciousness-based' medicine. This paper demonstrates how, by means of a series of narrative strategies deploying the motif of the semi-divine* rishi *or sage, and foregrounding personal experience as the ultimate source of spiritual legitimacy and authority, Chopra (a biomedical doctor with little or no formal training in ayurveda) seeks to secure legitimacy as an authority on ayurveda and an adept with extraordinary healing powers.*

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The popular health and wellbeing guru, Deepak Chopra, is a leading figure in the contemporary Western transnational holistic health milieu, and one of the most prolific anglophone writers on health and spirituality today. He is a qualified biomedical doctor who combines his biomedical expertise with yoga and ayurveda as well as a range of 'holistic' therapies, to practice what he describes as 'integrative medicine' in the US. This paper explores his autobiographical writing with a view to examining both his representation of ayurveda (the classical South Asian health tradition) and his self-representation as a mind-body healer.

Chopra was introduced to ayurveda in the 1980s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement. For a time he played a key role in promoting Maharishi Ayurveda, the Maharishi's version of this tradition, before parting ways with the TM movement and setting up his own independent practice. The autobiographical work to be explored here, entitled *Return of the Rishi: A Doctor's Story of Spiritual Transformation and Ayurvedic Healing* (first published in 1988) was written soon after Chopra's encounter with Mahesh Yogi, and at a time when he was an active participant in the TM movement, playing a key role in bringing Maharishi Ayurveda to the attention of American audiences.

Aravamudan (2006:28) describes *Return of the Rishi* as 'a spiritual autobiography of sorts that makes the bridge between Chopra's medical career and his adoption of the Maharishi's philosophy'. In fact, as this paper will argue, it is much more than this. By means of this narrative, Chopra, following the Maharishi's lead, interprets ayurveda as the basis of mind-body healing, attributing to it meanings far removed from those associated with it in its home context in South Asia. He draws directly from the discourse central to the TM movement, presenting ayurveda as a 'holistic' system of healing with meditation as its bedrock. Most importantly, the autobiographical narrative legitimizes Chopra as an accomplished ayurvedic healer. It charts his transformation into an adept who can perform extraordinary acts of healing.

In traditional South Asian contexts, securing legitimacy as a *vaidya* or ayurvedic practitioner usually required a number of years of tutelage and apprenticeship under an experienced physician. In modern India and Sri Lanka, universities and colleges following a standardized curriculum provide mass instruction in ayurveda. Those who complete the training programme and secure a BAMS (Bachelor of Ayurveda, Medicine and Surgery) degree are deemed qualified to set up practice. In Chopra's case, he has followed neither route. Instead he relies on personal experience of what he claims are ayurveda's 'truths'. As the narrative in his autobiography makes evident, and as I will illustrate in the sections to follow, Chopra's presumed expertise in ayurveda, like that of the Maharishi before him, is based on mystical gnostic insight; he claims to access the 'truth' of ayurveda though direct experiences of states of altered consciousness.

This emphasis on personal experience and insight is a central feature of the milieu of unchurched spirituality and of the holistic health sector in Euro-American contexts. A central tenet here is that authority lies within the self; the 'epistemological individualism' (Wallis 1984) central to this milieu requires that voices of authority (those of experts, charismatic leaders, figures of traditional authority) must be mediated through inner experience (Heelas 1996; Heelas, Woodhead et al 2004). Chopra, who is well-versed with the attitudes and orientations of this milieu, mediates the teachings of the Maharishi through his inner experiences. The narrative also portrays him as developing, on the strength of these inner experiences, a sense of his own extraordinary healing powers.

Since it is in his published works that he makes these claims, Chopra's reputation as an authority on ayurveda, health and wellbeing rests in large part on his writing and its positive reception by the targeted readership. The production of a voluminous range of publications on these subjects has been central to his popularity and legitimacy as a healer. As Alter (2004, xviii-xix) notes in relation to modern yoga, through such writing, authors articulate their version of 'truth'. Readers who accept this truth, and perceive it to be legitimate and meaningful, in effect acknowledge the author's authenticity and authority. Chopra's autobiographical work (along with his other early writings on ayurveda and healing[1]) is foundational to his authority and legitimacy as an ayurvedic healer. Central to Chopra's narrative strategy, as the following discussion will demonstrate, is the setting up of contrasts – between Indian tradition and Western modernity, between ayurveda and biomedicine, between the new spiritually awakened Chopra, and his old self. The narrative is framed in terms of his rediscovery, while serving in a busy hospital in the US, of India's spiritual wealth, of the Maharishi and Transcendental Meditation, and of his own potential as a healer. In what follows I will first provide a brief introduction to Deepak Chopra and his version of ayurveda, before going on the explore central themes and legitimizing strategies in his autobiographical narrative.

Deepak Chopra: healer and cultural entrepreneur

Chopra is a self-consciously modern figure, presenting himself before his transnational anglophone audiences not as a traditional guru, but as an urban secular healer (Baer 2003). He was among those initially hand-picked by the Maharishi to spearhead Maharishi Ayurveda (a version of ayurveda that combined TM with ayurvedic healing).[2] Chopra founded the Maharishi Ayurveda Products International which marketed and distributed Ayurvedic medicines supposedly 'rediscovered' by this guru (Zysk 2001). He was also tasked with directing the TM organization's main ayurvedic centre in Lancaster, Massachussetts. Chopra's association with the Maharishi was, however, short-lived. In 1991, an article on Maharishi Ayurveda in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, co-authored by Chopra and others affiliated to the TM

[1] Particularly relevant here are Chopra 1989, 1990.

[2] For an insider account of Maharishi Ayurveda, see Sharma 1996. Academic 'outsider' accounts are provided by Reddy 2000, and by Jeannotat, Humes and Newcombe in Wujastyk and Smith (eds.) 2008. (Also see the editors' 'Introduction' to this volume.)

establishment, became the subject of a major controversy (ibid.). The authors were accused of using the journal to promote Maharishi Ayurveda; they faced charges of misinforming and deceiving their readers, and of manipulating scientific data to further their own interests. This controversy, which generated a lot of bad publicity for the TM movement, would appear to have been a key factor precipitating Chopra's decision to part ways with the Maharishi.

In 1996, he co-founded The Chopra Center for Wellbeing in San Diego, California, with his colleague, David Simon, a qualified medic like Chopra. In the promotional material this Centre is described as providing 'an integrative approach to total well-being through self-awareness, and the practice of yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda'.[3] The Centre, according to its website, offers a wide variety of treatment programmes, retreats and teacher training courses that integrate the 'consciousness-based teachings of Vedic science, as translated by our founders', with 'cutting-edge research and modern western medicine'.[4] In 2000, he went on to establish the Chopra Foundation, dedicated to 'improving health and well-being, cultivating spiritual knowledge, expanding consciousness, and promoting world peace to all members of the human family'.[5]

Chopra promotes a highly optimistic vision of healing, attributing to the mind and consciousness unlimited potential which can be harnessed not just to cure disease, but also to overcome any and all perceived limitations in one's life. He has authored more than 80 books translated into over 40 languages, some of them ranking in *The New York Times* bestseller lists. He makes innumerable appearances on American television. He offers advice on matters ranging from boosting self-confidence, enjoying fulfilling relationships, winning friends and influencing people, to eating well, meditating, and sleeping soundly.

His clients have included celebrities like Demi Moore, and the late Elizabeth Taylor and George Harrison (Aravamudan 2006, 257). His annual income, running into millions of dollars, derives not just from the sale of products and services at the Chopra Centre, but also from other sources such as book royalties and lecture fees. His influence extends well beyond his affluent client-base; his writings, talks, inspirational messages, guided

[3] http://www.chopra.com/about/the-chopra-center (accessed 5/2/17)

[4] ibid.

[5] http://www.choprafoundation.org/about/about-the-chopra-foundation/ (accessed 05/09/17)

meditation videos, and general advice and counsel, are all freely accessible through various media including his books; blogs and podcasts; Facebook and Twitter; his own YouTube channel, The Chopra Well.[6] He is a controversial figure, but highly popular, a celebrity in his own right who caters to the health needs of Hollywood celebrities, and collaborates with such prominent figures in the American cultural and therapeutic scene as Oprah Winfrey.

Chopra is one in a long line of spirituality enthusiasts who, since the late 19th century, have sought to popularize Indian spirituality in the West. In keeping with the mode of guru-discourse that scholars (following the German Indologist, Paul Hacker) often describe as Neo-Hinduism,[7] Chopra too invokes ancient Hindu tradition as the source of spiritual wisdom. He attributes to ancient India great mystery, wisdom and purity, romanticizing the ancient world as primordial, mysterious and spiritually advanced, and contrasting this with the modern, secular West deemed to be lacking in these aspects. The ancient Indian spirituality he constructs is world-affirming, world-transforming and deeply practical. In his portrayal, as will be discussed in the sections to follow, ancient spirituality survives in present-day India in persons, places and practices as yet untouched by modernity.

Chopra shows a remarkable familiarity and ease with the values and priorities of the mind-body-spirit milieu in the West.[8] Chopra's narrative on ayurveda and spirituality is refracted through the prism of the modern spiritual milieu of unchurched seekership, and reflects seekers' key preoccupation with gaining self-knowledge and empowering the self through personal striving. In particular, he shares their deeply-held belief, influenced in no small measure by popular psychology and the Human Potential Movement,[9] that human beings possess infinite potential. The only thing that gets in the way of realizing this potential, according to the general consensus, is a lack of belief in

[6] https://www.youtube.com/user/TheChopraWell (accessed 28/02/18)

[7] See Halbfass (1995) for a discussion of Hacker's key ideas, and Altglas (2014) and Williamson (2010) for an outline of Neo-Hinduism, its key features, and the continuing circulation of Neo-Hindu ideas in the modern transnational milieu of unchurched spirituality.

[8] See eg, Fuller 2001, Hanegraaff 1997, Heelas 1996.

[9] On popular psychology and the attendant therapy culture in the US, see eg Rose 1989; Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Rieff 1987.

the self, and the persistence of restrictive and negative thought patterns. Reflecting the influence of New Thought and the Mind Cure movement,[10] this milieu greatly valorizes positive thinking and the power of the mind to break through all limitations. Positive thinking, and belief in infinite human potential, are both crucial ideals that Chopra deploys in his strategies to legitimize ayurveda as mind-body medicine, as we shall see. Indeed his own journey of 'spiritual transformation' as outlined in his autobiography is a journey towards the unlocking of his infinite potential as a healer.

Chopra's narrative strategies are deeply practical – they lead to 'a personal expression of power and authority' and 'make manifest a vision of attainable change in this world' (Coats and Emerich 2017, 5). His greatest asset as a writer of bestsellers on spirituality is his highly readable, personalized, dynamic and expressive style of writing. Equally important (though less obvious to the uncritical reader) is his ability to skillfully combine the cultural chauvinism and nationalistic pride central to Neo-Hindu notions of spirituality, with the universalistic, individual-centred, experimental, experiential aspects of modern Western spiritual seeking. The result is a spiritual cocktail that is uniquely his own. He is a complex figure, American *and* Indian; biomedical doctor *and* holistic healer; modern in self-representation *and* mediator of supposedly ancient and traditional wisdom. This complexity serves him well, providing him with the necessary cultural capital for his self-representation as a modern source of traditional wisdom.

Chopra's success is largely attributable to his personal charisma, his remarkably fluent and engaging discursive style in written and spoken English, astute media management, and skillful corporate organization and marketing, all of which have served to win him audiences from across the globe and secure for him a niche in the highly lucrative transnational holistic health market. For a charismatic healer with a very significant public presence in the holistic health sector in North America and beyond, and a vastly

[10] Albanese 2007 and Hanegraaff 1997, among others, discuss the widespread influence in North America and Western Europe of the New Thought and Mind Cure movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Mind Cure is based on the healing power of faith and positive thinking, and New Thought is associated with the belief that divinity lies within the 'true' self and that it is an inexhaustible source of happiness. Both are precursors to modern 'therapy culture' which sees all behaviours and conditions falling short of idealized states of happiness and wellbeing as requiring treatment that can lead to self-realization or self-actualization.

successful business enterprise, Chopra has not received the scholarly attention he deserves. He finds brief mention in studies of Maharishi Ayurveda,[11] and in a small number of studies on New Age healers.[12] Srinivas Aravamudan (2006) devotes a few pages to a discussion of Chopra in his analysis of the discourses of modern anglophone gurus. Beyond this, there is little scholarly material available on Chopra. He is a particularly interesting figure to study not just because of his vast popularity and influence in transnational mind-body-spirit circles, but also because of the highly innovative ways in which he repackages things deemed ancient/ Vedic/ ayurvedic/ Indian/ Eastern for a modern anglophone audience.

Spiritualized ayurveda, consciousness-based medicine, and strategies of legitimization

Ayurveda, as elaborated in its classical texts dating back roughly 2,000 years, is a system based on humoral diagnostics. Disease is understood to result from the aggravation of one or more of three humours, wind, bile and phlegm, leading to blockages in the system (Wujastyk 2003, xviii). Ayurveda's therapeutic armamentarium includes dietetics and herbal remedies, minor surgery, as well as a range of procedures of catharsis and elimination which include oleation, enema, purgation, emesis, douching, and sudation (ibid.). In its home context in South Asia, ayurveda has been profoundly transformed by its encounter with modernity and particularly with biomedicine.[13] The modernized, standardized, professionalized versions of 'official' ayurveda that now obtain in India and Sri Lanka borrow deeply from the biomedical model not just in terms of their institutional and organizational set-up, but also in terms of their knowledge base and methods of practice.

It was in the 1970s and 1980s that ayurveda first came to the attention of audiences in North America and Western Europe (Smith and Wujastyk 2008:9). Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was one of the early pioneers to promote (his version of) ayurveda outside India. In the decades to follow, ayurveda has developed an increasingly visible presence in Western mind-body-spirit or 'holistic health' networks. It is noteworthy that ayurveda's development in the US has relied primarily on its appeal beyond South Asian immigrant populations, and that this has meant its marketing as an exotic cultural commodity

[11] See, for instance, Jeannotat 2008, Humes 2008, Newcombe 2008, Zysk 2001

[12] Eg., Baer 2003; Albanese 1992; Albanese 2007, 447-448; Heelas 1999, 67.

[13] See Banerjee 2009; Bode 2008; Leslie 1973, 1976; Langford 2002.

(Reddy 2002, 99). Scholars have noted the influence of 'New Age' or 'unchurched' or 'religiously unaffiliated' spirituality (Reddy 2002, Smith and Wujastyk 2008, Zysk 2001) on ayurveda (as well as other medical transplants) in America, resulting in a shift in emphasis 'from physic to metaphysic' (Fuller 1989). In other words traditions like ayurveda have undergone a process of 'spiritualization' (Reddy 2002, 104), with a marked increase in their metaphysical content, and an increased reliance on spirituality-centred concepts ('energy', 'vibrations'), goals (balance, harmony, self-healing), and philosophies (self-control, responsibility).

Maharishi Ayurveda is one such version of 'spiritualized' ayurveda. It marks a departure from mainstream ayurveda in the Indian subcontinent in important ways. Maharishi Ayurveda draws centrally upon the principles underpinning Transcendental Meditation. The Maharishi defined TM's goal in terms of leading the mind 'to ever more subtle levels of creation', resulting ultimately in the consciousness of 'the source of creation beyond relativity – the blissful field of the Absolute' (Jeannotat 2008: 287). He called this the 'Unified Field of pure consciousness' and claimed that it was no other than the 'innermost core of one's being'. He maintained that mind control through meditation was 'easy' and that this control could bring peace and enable the everyday experience of *anandam* or bliss (Humes 2008, 313). He claimed that this transformation could be brought about not just at the level of the individual but also of society, and indeed the world, as a whole. His movement aimed to bring about the 'total development of the human race' (Jeannotat 2008, 299).

Maharishi Ayurveda, based squarely on TM's central ideas, posited the development of consciousness as indispensable to attaining and maintaining optimal health, and emphasized meditation techniques to develop the integrated and holistic functioning of body and mind. According to early promoters of Maharishi Ayurveda, ayurvedic knowledge had come fragmented, and some of it forgotten, as a result of India's history of political turbulence (Jeannotat 2008, 289). Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's objective was to return this knowledge to a state of completeness by restoring to it mental techniques such as TM that, he claimed, were previously part of ayurveda's knowledge corpus, but that had since been sidelined or forgotten. The aim was to 'unfold the full potential of the physiology of consciousness' (Wallace, as cited in Jeannotat 2008, 289).

Hari Sharma (1996, 244), a Maharishi Ayurveda advocate, describes this system as 'consciousness-based' medicine. In his words:

> The ultimate basis of prevention and cure is restoring one's conscious connection to (or memory of) [the] innermost core of one's being and experience. This reconnection is the basis of an integrated approach to health care; integration of the different layers of life begins with reconnecting one's life to the substrate upon which all its layers are based. The innermost core of one's experience is considered identical to the home of all the laws of nature that operate throughout the universe. The body contains, at its basis, the total potential of natural law, and all of Maharishi Ayurveda's modalities aim to enable the full expression of the body's inner intelligence (Sharma 1996, 246).

Ayurveda, according to its classical texts, has little to do with the transformation of consciousness, and focuses instead, in large part, on the physiological changes resulting from aggravated or weakened humours, in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Maharishi Ayurveda, by contrast, places consciousness at the very centre of its health practice. 'Remembering' the unified field, according to Sharma (ibid., 247), 'enlivens the orderly patterns that prevail in a healthy body'. It is the loss of 'connection' with the unified field that results in disease. The methods for achieving health, in the Maharishi's reformulation, are far more diverse and wide-ranging than those typically associated with ayurveda. Transcendental Meditation is the main method, understood as the key Vedic technique for developing consciousness, for restoring the link between the unified field and one's innermost core, and thereby restoring health. Meditation typically plays no part in classical forms of ayurveda, and the Maharishi's reinterpretation in this respect is unconventional and innovative. Maharishi Ayurveda comprises more than just TM, however; it also selectively incorporates ideas and practices derived from the more conventional forms of ayurveda in the Indian subcontinent, but with important shifts in the meanings associated with these.

The Maharishi relied on a range of strategies to legitimize his version of ayurveda. First, he relied on his own authority as a sage and guru, claiming the ability to 'divine' the truth of the Vedas through mystical insight. Second, he relied on science, seeking to secure scientific credentials for his techniques and practices by means of numerous experiments conducted in the laboratories of the TM enterprise measuring, for instance, the physical and mental changes that accompanied the attainment of 'transcendental consciousness' (Jeannotat 2008, 298). Third, he also relied on prominent Indian Ayurvedic physicians to support and legitimize his Maharishi Ayurveda project.

Particularly noteworthy were Brihaspati Dev Triguna, V.M. Dwivedi, and Balraj Maharaj, physicians or *vaidyas* of some renown in India, all of whom participated in the many conferences organized by the TM enterprise, and allowed their images to be printed on the labels of Maharishi Ayurveda products, thus authenticating it as true to tradition (ibid., 302).

The Maharishi stipulated a precondition in the early days that only those holding a medical degree could train as practitioners of Maharishi Ayurveda. The early practitioners were all thus biomedical doctors who received special training from *vaidyas* from India working for the Maharishi (Humes 2008, 320). Deepak Chopra was one such trainee – he was encouraged by the Maharishi to study under the tutelage of Triguna. Judging from Chopra's autobiographical narrative, his engagement with Triguna was fleeting; there is no mention of a sustained period of apprenticeship with this physician.

As an early spokesperson for Maharishi Ayurveda, Chopra too places meditation and transformed consciousness at the centre of ayurvedic healing. As a meditator himself, he claims to have attained a level of transcendence in his meditative experience that enables him to heal himself and others. This is the source of his legitimacy. In order to make this claim, he introduces the figure of the *rishi* (ancient sage or seer) as a central motif in his narrative, as the title suggests. In Vedic literature, the *rishi* is a peculiar category of semi-divine being distinct from gods and ordinary men and women, the inspired poet of the Vedic hymns, an ecstatic visionary. In post-Vedic literature, the *rishi*, as all-seeing and all-knowing sage, is the possessor of supernatural abilities and deep wisdom gleaned through years of yogic meditation and austerities (*tapas*). The knowledge of ayurveda, according to its origin myths, was first obtained by *rishis*; they are believed to have possessed the special psychic powers necessary to perceive and receive this divine knowledge from the gods. In Chopra's work, the *rishi* brings together, in one potent symbol, many of the key themes associated with modern understandings of (Hindu) India's superior strengths – secret gnosis, higher levels of consciousness, spiritual transcendence.

In Chopra's use of the term *rishi*, three different levels of meaning are discernible. He uses the term to refer to the mythic *rishi* associated with Vedic and post-Vedic literature. He also uses the term to refer to his early mentor, Mahesh Yogi, a self-proclaimed great (*maha*) sage (*rishi*), to whom he attributes immeasurable wisdom and insight. In a third

and rather innovative move, Chopra uses the term '*rishi* value' to refer to a quality of insight and perfection which, he claims, lies dormant in all persons, and can be rekindled through 'simple' practices like meditation. His understanding of ayurveda is built on the idea that awakening one's *rishi* value is the route to curing all one's physical and mental problems, and therefore the key to 'perfect health'.

In *Return of the Rishi* (henceforth *ROTR*), Chopra describes silence as central to the experience and attainment of one's 'rishi value'. A teacher like the Maharishi, he claims, 'embodies the truth he talks about' (*ROTR* 1991, 144), and this 'truth' lies in the deep silence that the sage or *rishi* emanates.

> In a real sense, silence is the wisest value a rishi possesses, because it needs no arguments to persuade. In the presence of a rishi, the listener becomes like a rishi himself. This is not a delusion. Everyone possesses the rishi value – the capacity for wisdom – at the quietest level of his consciousness. When it senses its likeness, it simply responds (ibid., 145).

Explaining that it is to this '*rishi* value' that the book title refers, he writes:

> The rishi who has returned is inside you and me, for "rishi" also means the knower inside every human mind. When this knower is asleep, people forget themselves. They lose the memory of man's central place in the scheme of nature and therefore fall prey to disaster – war, sickness, turmoil, and unhappiness. The goal of life is to wake up from this false condition and regain the power of a rishi, whose slightest desire is taken as a command by the forces that shape reality (ibid., vi).

This particular and innovative use of the term *rishi* is central to Chopra's representation of ayurveda as mind-body medicine; in this understanding, a transformed state of consciousness, and the achievement of ultimate silence rooted in self-belief, is essential for healing to take place. The awakening of one's '*rishi* value' can as well be described in terms of 'self-realization' or 'self-actualization' or the attainment of optimum 'human potential' – ideas central to humanist psychology and the works of prominent figures in the American psycho-therapeutic scene like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (Illouz 2008, 159-161) whose work was known to Chopra,[14] and whose influence has left a

[14] He refers to their works, and to figures like William Jones, in some of his other publications, eg Chopra 1989.

lasting legacy for networks of unchurched spirituality and holistic health in the US and beyond. Most importantly, the concept of '*rishi* value' is central to Chopra's assertion of his own spiritual mastery, as the discussion in following sections will demonstrate. The autobiography, as previously noted, relies on a series of contrasts that are central to the narrative strategy: ayurveda (supposedly limitless in its potential) is contrasted with biomedicine (limited and constrained); India (mysterious and spiritual) is contrasted with the modern West (materialistic and rational); Chopra's new spiritually awakened self is contrasted with his old unseeing self, blind to the *rishi* within. By means of these contrasts, the autobiographical narrative affirms Chopra's authority and legitimacy as an ayurvedic healer capable of working near-miraculous feats of mind-body healing.

Indian tradition, Western modernity

Chopra's autobiographical work charts the first four decades of his life. Here Chopra describes his initial journey into the biomedical profession (first as a student in India and then as a doctor in the US), his subsequent forays into ayurveda, his encounter with Mahesh Yogi, his growing interest in spirituality, and his move towards a career in integrative medicine. Chopra's main purpose in this book, as he explains right at the outset, is to narrate the story of his discovery of ayurveda, 'the traditional system of Indian medicine that has descended to us directly from the ancient rishis' (*ROTR* 1991, vi). Ayurveda, according to Chopra, 'contains the spiritual element that Western scientific medicine jettisoned three hundred years ago' (ibid., vii). The goal of ayurveda, he claims, 'is to transform the patient's personal reality, which means taking his subjective viewpoint as seriously as […] his physical condition' (ibid., ix). Ayurveda, Chopra writes, 'signifies more than a system of medicine. It is India's guide to life' (ibid., 22). He sees it as part of India's bequest to humanity: at its heart lies a 'stupendous view of human potential' (ibid.,21).

Chopra exoticizes ancient India and Indian traditions as 'primordial and mystical kernels of spirituality' (Altglas 2014: 12). Early in the narrative, Chopra describes a dream he had as a child. He uses this as a framing device, infusing it with symbolic meaning. Central to the dream is a black cobra, which lies dead in a pool of blood in the middle of a vast field. Nearby a small mongoose leaps around in a macabre dance – the snake is its victim (*ROTR* 1991, 20). The cobra, Chopra explains, stands for India's 'deepest wisdom and power,' its spirituality and ancient tradition. Chopra equates the death of the cobra with what he describes as India's 'sad decline' (ibid) from its ancient

glory. The mongoose, Chopra explains, represents science, rationality, biomedicine, modernization and technical progress – all of which have, he claims, have contributed to the cobra's death.

It becomes clear in the course of his narrative, however, that the dream is not quite the same as reality; the cobra, though in decline, is not in fact dead. Vestiges of India's traditions live on, it turns out, in ordinary Indian people, in everyday life, in sacred places, pilgrimage centres, in the retelling of India's mythic stories, and its rituals and festivals. By providing the reader with a series of fleeting glimpses of India's surviving traditions and indeed its mysteries, Chopra carefully paints a picture of an exotic, mysterious, and spiritually-rich India, that lies just beyond the façade of modernization and Westernization.

Chopra develops this theme of India's latent spirituality by setting up a series of oppositions between persons and traditions that symbolize the cobra, and those symbolizing the mongoose. He draws the reader's attention to one such opposition which has a bearing on his early life -- that between his own grandmother and his father. The grandmother, Chopra explains, was steeped in traditional Indian values and customs; she embodied the wisdom and faith of traditional India. She was well-versed in the stories from the Hindu epics and Puranas, steadfast in her worship of the many gods and goddesses, a firm believer in the traditional ideals of spiritual seeking and enlightenment. The stories of Rama and Krishna and other mythic characters that she narrated to her grandchildren had 'great magic, mystery and adventure in them' (*ROTR* 1991, 31).

> […] Grandmother implied that the most awesome of powers did not belong to just gods and *sidhas*, the perfected beings. They were in us too, only we were not yet perfected. Could a boy really fly through the air or read people's minds or cure mortals of horrible diseases simply by touching them? My grandmother stood firm. The *sidhas* in the Vedas could do all this and more. One day we would become like them (ibid.).

The 'cobra', it would seem, remained alive in the grandmother, and in this respect she presents a striking contrast to his father, a doctor and a prominent figure in the medical establishment in independent India. His father is portrayed as a rational man, committed to the methods of modern scientific enquiry, and often dismissive of

traditional forms of faith. The grandmother had faith in traditional ayurveda -- a 'heresy' from his father's point of view. Chopra describes her as being proficient in simple traditional healing practices, and describes these practices as having proved efficacious on more than one occasion, much to his father's chagrin.

> My father proudly practiced Western medicine and looked at his accomplishments as a personal triumph. He had every reason to think that modern India would be well off without the ignorant old ways. Ayurveda, being "unscientific" to Western eyes, could join the other castoffs. It never occurred to […] my father that Ayurveda might be something great (ibid., 23).

It also never occurred to his father, Chopra writes, that a marriage between ayurveda and modern scientific medicine might be possible. As the son of such a scientifically-minded father, Chopra was an unlikely candidate to rediscover ayurveda (ibid., 24). And yet, as a result of the Maharishi's intervention in his life, he claims that 'the appeal of ayurvedic wisdom became self-evident' before long, at a time in his life when 'the idea of a medicine that keeps man whole was tremendously welcome' (ibid., 25).

In parallel with the opposition between the father and the grandmother, Chopra presents further oppositions and contrasts in the narrative, to reinforce the theme of India's primordial spirituality. One such contrast is that between his scientifically-minded physiology lecturer at medical school, a certain Professor Nanda, and an Indian ascetic or *sadhu* whose life was dedicated to spiritual seeking. Professor Nanda, according to the narrative, decided to perform an experiment on the ascetic in order to ascertain the effects of meditation on his bodily functions.[15] The experiment involved burying the *sadhu* alive for a certain duration, during which time the *sadhu* (whom Chopra describes as a 'saint') would rely on meditative techniques to stay alive.

[15] This kind of experimentation has a much longer history in India. The pioneer of modern yoga, Swami Kuvalayananda, was one of the first to attempt to 'conduct research on the "uncanny psychophysical effects" of various higher states of yogic consciousness' (Alter 2004, 82). There are clear connections between the experiments of Kuvalayananda, those of Professor Nanda, and the experiments conducted in the TM laboratories. In all three cases, the scientist, motivated by 'a profound philosophical spirituality' is concerned to find 'the objective, rational means by which to measure and test the power of extrasensory perception and transcendental consciousness' (ibid.).

This saint, Chopra explains, was dressed in the faded saffron robes of a wandering monk; he had matted hair, a long unkempt beard, and holy ashes smeared on his body (ibid., 44).

> As a curiosity, this saint was very obliging. Professor Nanda placed him in a wooden box just large enough for him to sit inside in lotus posture. As the top was nailed on, we caught a last glimpse of him, half lidded and immobile as he began to meditate. Then the box was lowered into a pit dug especially for the purpose in one courtyard of the school. Dirt was thrown over the top while the physiology students looked on. (ibid., 45)

Six days later, Chopra tells the reader, the box was lifted back out. When the top was prised off, the *sadhu* slowly stood up. He was escorted to the physiology lab and offered a glass of milk. He was then hooked up to various monitors and his pulse rate, heart function, and oxygen levels were measured. None of the bodily mechanisms about which he had been taught, Chopra comments, could account for the strange and unusual readings obtained. 'The simple fact was that the saint had lived peacefully for six days under conditions that would have destroyed a normal body and mind in less than twelve hours' (ibid., 58). All present, Chopra notes, were amazed by what they discovered but, after a while, the episode was simply forgotten. The *sadhu* walked away from the school, and that was the end of the matter.

Chopra notes that as a youngster he was dismissive of such experiences, and of figures like the *sadhu*, seeing these as relics belonging to another, a 'primitive', India. He believed that with the passage of time, 'science would sweep away the saints' (ibid., 44).

> I did not [then] realize what deep footprints our saint was leaving behind. It would take ten years before I had a significant encounter with meditation. […] I would give a great deal now to know more about the content of that saint's mind and its wisdom. About his soul, the most important thing to him, a deeper silence prevails. In our arrogance, we thought that a saint could be captured on graph paper. But his quiet heart kept its secrets (ibid., 58).

Chopra not only attributes great mystery and magic to the ancient traditions and techniques that the ascetic represents, but also points to the futility of the scientific

method that, he suggests, can never quite capture the truths of ancient India embodied in this figure. Professor Nanda's approach and methods, it would seem, could take him only so far – the 'saint' possessed spiritual skills and strengths, emblematic of the mysterious and wise cobra, that Professor Nanda's scientific equipment could not record, and which his scientific theories could not explain.

This series of oppositions, in Chopra's account, builds up to what is in essence the central opposition in the narrative – that between Chopra's old, pre-spiritual, scientifically-minded self, and his new, spiritually-awakened self. The old Chopra represents a selfhood shaped by Western modernity, scientific enquiry and rational thinking. He is much like his father and Professor Nanda in these respects, and the cobra (within) is all but dead. The new Chopra, deeply touched by experiences that science cannot explain, becomes open to faith, mystery and miracle – he is now on the path to discovering Indian spirituality; the cobra within him begins to bestir itself and will soon be revived. The passage from the old self to the new is enabled by means of an encounter first with Transcendental Meditation, and then with its pioneer, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. A key catalyst to this transformation, according to the narrative, is Chopra's disillusionment, as a practising biomedical doctor, with biomedicine's approach and methods, and its modes of practice in modern hospitals.

Ayurveda versus biomedicine

Chopra claims in his autobiography to have decided, at the age of sixteen, to follow in his father's footsteps and become a biomedical doctor. What prompted this decision was Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Arrowsmith*, which Chopra read with eager enthusiasm as a youngster. The novel, Chopra explains, tells the story of the scientifically-minded Martin Arrowsmith, who makes a journey from his small native town in the American Midwest to the highest tiers of America's scientific community. Chopra claims to have been particularly moved by the novel's descriptions of Arrowsmith's care for his patients, his selfless striving for their wellbeing, and his unwavering pursuit of medical research for the benefit of humankind. Over six years of intensive study, Chopra prepared for his medical career. Just months after graduating from medical school in India, he was invited to take up a post at a hospital in New Jersey.

It becomes clear from Chopra's narrative that the medical profession he encountered in the US bore little semblance to the version idealized in Sinclair Lewis's novel. He

describes the ethos in US hospitals as cold and heartless. The doctors, he argues, 'wear blinders, seeing patients as walking syndromes and not as people to be loved and cared for' (*ROTR* 1991, x). While working in American hospitals, Chopra perceived his patients not as individuals but simply as 'the abortion, the overdose, the laceration, the heart attack' (ibid., 7). He seldom spent any time with them, and rarely got to know them or understand their hopes and fears. Even though doctors may be moved by their patient's feelings and emotions, he asserts, they are trained to treat only the physical distress. The patient's feelings are a 'side-issue'. 'The medicine I was taught,' he writes, 'had been stripped of ideals altogether in favor of a practical zeal for repairing the bodies of sick people' (ibid., 9). 'Medicine', Chopra insists, 'should be about healing people and making them happy' (ibid., 8).

Doctors were motivated to work hard not because they desired to see patients well and happy, but because their personal career ambitions could only be furthered by meeting the near-impossible targets set by the hospital management. Doctors, he claims, contribute to keeping their patients sick by 'fostering a diseased system and beyond that a diseased world' (ibid., 80). 'There is so much momentum in the system', he writes, 'that doctors go with it, telling themselves that, after all, progress is always being made' (ibid., 81). When doctors cannot solve problems, they rely on the comforting but 'perilous' belief that medical technology will find solutions (ibid.). Chopra is highly skeptical of the claim that medical progress will be achieved through technological and scientific breakthrough. He notes how there has not been any let up to date in the number of ill people passing through the hospital system, some never to return. He is also critical of invasive technology-reliant medical procedures, of the iatrogenic effects of medical intervention, and the impact on the patient's morale. The system as a whole is one that Chopra deems unnecessarily complex and unnatural – 'a new trend had to begin', he writes, 'moving toward simplicity and human contact' (ibid., 87).

It is strategically important to Chopra's narrative that his discovery of Transcendental Meditation took place at a time when he was himself in need of healing -- his stress-levels as a biomedical doctor had peaked. This context is significant for Chopra's legitimization of (the Maharishi's version of) ayurveda, since it reinforces some of the contrasts that he draws between ayurvedic and biomedical practice. Chopra was at the time employed at a hospital in New Jersey. His hospital shifts, he notes, were getting more and more rushed, his days were blurring into nights, he was consuming excessive quantities of black coffee, drinking whiskey most evenings, and smoking at least a pack of cigarettes a day. His schedule, he writes, kept his stomach churning all the time and

he had a constant taste of gastric juice in his mouth (ibid., 125). One day he chanced upon a TM book in a secondhand bookshop in Boston. He was struck by the simplicity of the practice it recommended. It did not require 'working strenuously for enlightenment'; instead, correct meditation was 'an effortless process that led to deeper relaxation' (ibid., 124). The technique was quick and easy, with each session lasting only about fifteen minutes. The experience was 'quiet and serene and without strain' (ibid., 127). Most importantly, he claims, it worked – within days he noticed his stress levels drop. He stopped drinking and smoking, and began to feel an extraordinary sense of wellbeing.

It was another five years before Chopra first met with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The meeting with the TM guru took place in 1985 at a venue in Washington. The narrative suggests that Chopra was deeply affected by the Maharishi's simplicity and deep silence. It is noteworthy that silence is a recurring motif in his writing and would seem to be a core element in Chopra's understanding of spirituality.

> His manner was quite simple, but at the same time, as he chatted with us, one could not imagine paying attention to anyone else. At a point early in our meeting, I noticed that my own attention, exposed to his, had become very concentrated. And without any effort, my mind had fallen silent. No thoughts moved through it, and there wasn't the usual ricochet of stray impressions – just silence. This seemed an extraordinarily pleasant state to be in, because I felt completely unselfconscious (ibid., 140-41).

Return of the Rishi was authored just three years after Chopra's first meeting with the Maharishi. Chopra's enthusiasm for Mahesh Yogi is evident here. He writes that he was in no doubt that the Maharishi was everything that his title implied – 'a great sage, a knower and teacher of reality' (ibid., 144-45). Inspired by the Maharishi's teachings, he accepted the Maharishi's invitation to 'come and look at Ayurveda with us' (ibid., 143). His association with this guru developed over the next few years, even as he spearheaded the 'Maharishi Ayurveda' initiative.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi serves, in Chopra's narrative, as the gateway to what he describes interchangeably as 'Eastern spirituality', 'Vedic wisdom', and the 'knowledge of the ancients'. He describes both the Maharishi, and the traditional India he is understood to represent, in the most glorious terms:

> Visiting the Maharishi in his homeland is like returning to Bharata, the India of antiquity and light. Enlightenment came into existence in Bharata and fathered a culture. One sees its traces in the oldest images of art that have survived. So many of them depict the same unfading scene, of common people seated on the ground surrounding a great sage, a rishi. The sage appears to be delighting his rapt listeners with his words. He is talking about enlightenment, telling them that one day they will be perfect. He describes a path older than their memory and more permanent that the low, red hills they can see on the horizon (ibid., 196).

To be around the Maharishi, Chopra writes, is like living in the ancestral images, to be back in the 'original India'. Time (antiquity) and space (the land of Bharata) are exoticized and spiritualized here, strategically differentiated from modern everyday life. Reconnecting with his native roots is, for Chopra, about reconnecting with the India of the past, through the mediation of the Maharishi.

Most importantly, Mahesh Yogi serves as Chopra's gateway to ayurveda. 'At the soul of India', he writes, 'there is an expansive spiritual joy. Ayurveda is completely a part of this view, and therefore its aim is the constant expansion of man's happiness' (*ROTR* 1991, 22). Ayurveda, in Chopra's narrative, provides the perfect counterpoint to biomedicine. In his understanding, biomedical doctors cure physical disease, whereas ayurvedic physicians heal persons. Biomedical methods seek to control nature, whereas ayurveda is 'natural'. Biomedicine is heavily reliant on technology; ayurveda is simple and almost intuitive. Biomedical methods are often dangerous, risky, place stress on the body, and can sometimes result in iatrogenic disease; ayurveda is gentle and soothing.[16] 'Ayurveda takes the vista of man to be infinite. The universe is the macrocosm, man is the microcosm. But Ayurveda speaks delicately, so delicately that you see Western medicine as clumsy' (ibid., 113).

[16] This description of Ayurveda as gentle and soothing reflects a domestication of this tradition in contemporary Western contexts where its harsher modalities, still in use in some traditional practices in South Asia, are ignored. Zimmerman (1992) aptly describes modern transnational Anglophone forms of this tradition in terms of their 'flower power'.

Chopra describes at some length his first encounter with an ayurvedic physician. The physician in question, Brihaspati Dev Triguna, was known for his use of pulse reading to assess the patient's condition. Describing Triguna's method, Chopra writes:

> He does not interfere with a patient's life. His fingers merely touch the pace of that life. They sense its rhythms. They extract knowledge of disharmony, broken vibrations that might cause ill health. It is enough. There is only one healthy pace to Dr. Triguna, the pace of the cosmos. The essence of health is to attend to the pacemaker. Once that is done, disease is done (ibid., 115).

The physician's most important advice, he notes, is that patients are responsible for their own condition. They can choose the affirming attitudes that promote health (ibid., 92). Disease, in the ayurvedic understanding, 'starts out humbly in the body, as some imperceptible imbalance, and proceeds slowly from there. The outcome of a full-blown disease may be devastating, but it has been built up through insignificant everyday actions' – what we eat and drink, how we behave, how our emotions affect us (ibid., 92). By paying attention to these things, the patient can make active choices that support health. Ayurveda, he writes 'gives a patient control over himself long before he becomes a patient' (ibid., 93).

Ayurveda, in Chopra's exoticized version, is everything that biomedicine is not. As Altglas (2014) notes, exoticization suggests an attempt to grasp (and convey) otherness, but more significantly, it makes otherness strangely alluring and beautiful. Narratives that exoticize a culture or tradition idealize its otherness (but also 'domesticate' it) by either ignoring, or lamenting, the present-day realities on the ground. It is noteworthy that in Chopra's account of ayurveda he completely ignores the far-reaching processes of modernization that mainstream Ayurveda has undergone in India. Modern ayurveda in India is significantly biomedicalized – it has adopted biomedicine's institutional frameworks as well as its knowledge systems, its principles and paradigms, in ways that, some scholars argue (eg. Banerjee 2009, Bode 2008, Langford 2002) have undermined this tradition's integrity. This is an aspect of ayurveda that Chopra conveniently overlooks in his narrative.

The Return of the *Rishi*

The narrative in Chopra's work is thus shot through with two central sentiments -- intense dissatisfaction with the way the medical profession is practiced in modern clinics and hospitals, and, alongside this, a deep reverence towards traditional Indian practices, many of which, Chopra notes, cannot readily be explained by means of scientific and empirico-rational principles and methods. The polarization between the modern and the traditional, between scientific rationality and faith, are crucial to Chopra's strategies for legitimizing ayurveda. He presents his case in terms of a central contrast between a system (biomedicine) that is critically limited by its emphasis on scientific methods and an alternative (ayurveda) whose scope is unlimited, boundless. It is important to note, however, that Chopra does not reject biomedicine in its entirety; what he appears to push for is very much an integrated approach where the practitioner complements biomedical knowledge and methods with approaches drawn from (his version of) ayurveda.

In Chopra's version of ayurveda, based closely on the Maharishi's interpretation, ayurvedic healing relies centrally on the practice of meditation and the transformation of human consciousness. I noted previously Chopra's experience of heightened wellbeing as a result of his initial practice of TM. This however was not the only change that he claims to have experienced. Beyond this, he writes, 'something more personal was occurring, like a curtain being drawn aside at midnight' (*ROTR* 1991, 127). The early practice of meditation, he clams, gave him his first experiential taste of what words like 'wisdom' and 'perfection' really meant. His nose, he writes, had just caught the smell of sea breezes, and he knew he would reach the sea (ibid.) This initial experience with meditation, in 1980, marked the beginning of a turn in Chopra's life. He was on a path leading towards 'enlightenment'. This is not enlightenment in the traditional Hindu sense of liberation or *moksha*, it is not about world-rejection or world-transcendence. Instead it is emphatically this-worldly and life-affirming. At its heart is the experience of deep silence, calm and inner poise, leading to the attainment of wisdom and perfection in the here and now, and holding the promise of perfect health, happiness and prosperity. Indeed with the practice of Transcendental Meditation, Chopra was beginning to awaken his own '*rishi* value'.

The transformation of the patient's consciousness (and to awaken the '*rishi* value' lying dormant within) is central to what Chopra understands as his own work as a healer. The goal of ayurveda, he claims, 'is to transform the patient's personal reality, which means taking his subjective viewpoint as seriously as […] his physical condition (*ROTR* 1991,

ix). The all-important ingredient in treatment, he asserts, is 'the patient's confidence in his own strength to recover' (ibid., 79). Ayurveda, Chopra claims, 'places its highest emphasis on allowing consciousness to find its own way through the damage in the body' (ibid., 153). The influence of Mind Cure and New Thought in Chopra's healing approach is readily evident here.

Chopra's model of ayurveda would appear to combine two different healing frameworks that Albanese (1992) identifies with respect to 'New Age healing' – the harmonial and the shamanic. In the first, she writes, the law of harmony prevails. Healing here means 'harmonizing the energies of the body so that they resonate with larger natural forces and laws' (ibid., 77). The healer's manipulative efforts work subtly at the physical-energetic level. The aim is to remove obstructions that block the full operation of harmonial law. In the second, 'shamanic law' reigns supreme (ibid.). Healing means 'journeying into the realm of non-matter in which subtle forces transmute into material substance' (ibid.). Mind and imagination (and, in the case of Chopra, I would add, faith) assume hegemony over the harmonial life of matter. The healing shaman, whether self or other, travels to the place of primal energy from which the blueprint for organic life is thought to come (ibid.).

It is clear from the account in *Return of the Rishi* that Chopra understands healing, at least in part, in terms of the removal of blockages and the restoration of harmony and balance. Indeed more conventional forms of ayurvedic practice are rooted in a harmonial model, and this becomes readily evident in Chopra's description of the healing approach of physicians like Triguna. Chopra's addition of a shamanic model to the harmonial one (drawing in large part from Maharishi Ayurveda) means that self-belief, and the infinite potential of the human mind to effect change, become central to his approach. The centrality of the mind, faith, and consciousness in this version of ayurveda differentiates it radically from biomedicine and the scientific preoccupation with the empirical, the rational and the material. Healing can now be achieved by the patient – what is required is unshakeable belief that one will be healed. This can be enabled, it would seem, by means of the sustained practice of meditation, and through the guidance and ministrations of a shamanic healer.

From his account of cases where Chopra seeks to transform the patient's consciousness, the reader gets some understanding of Chopra's methods of 'ayurvedic' healing. He recounts his experiences with a male patient who had been diagnosed with terminal

lung cancer. The doctors had decided that further biomedical treatment was futile. Chopra's approach was to instill in this person the self-belief that he was going to get well. He describes his exchanges with the patient thus (*ROTR* 1991, 152-53):

> "Let's get you well," I [Chopra] said. He [the cancer patient] looked at me, first with amazement, then with tremendous relief. He was beyond the art of medicine, and that had brought him despair. Now someone was introducing the art of belief. I considered his happiness at least as important as his survival. I described a schedule of diet, rest, meditation, and a special regimen called *panchakarma*, which Ayurveda uses to detoxify the body. […] It sets the stage for the patient's own power to recover. […]
>
> When he asked me outright how I would cure him, I evaded the question. "You're the player," I said. "My staff and I are only the cheerleaders. But we'll never stop cheering."
>
> He listened to me eagerly. I asked if we could make a pact. He had to promise to get well. He agreed. I could see that this simple tactic strongly affected him. We shook hands on it: he was going to recover from the cancer, and that was that. He left with a sense of purpose I had not seen in him an hour earlier. He might be happy again, even though his illness seemed to pose such a huge obstacle.

In this instance, the patient's will to recover, he writes, was all that he had to work with. Chopra's hope was for a spontaneous remission, motivated, he explains, at the deepest level of self. Guided by the 'uncompromising thought' at this deep level that the whole person must recover completely, the body, he claims, has no choice but to obey. The physician and the patient must be convinced to the depths of their hearts that the patient will get well (ibid., 153). In this particular instance, the method appears not to have worked. The patient, it would seem, did not believe firmly enough in the possibility of his recovery – he was a heavy smoker and continued to smoke despite the doctor's advice to quit. Eventually, after a critical turn, his daughter took him home. Even so, Chopra notes, whereas the doctors had given him three months to live he had lived for eight under Chopra's care.

Chopra realizes his full potential as *rishi* in the narrative when he uses his newfound healing powers to bring a patient back from the brink of death. The patient, a female stroke victim, and her husband were already practitioners of TM and had been in touch with Chopra about a surgery she was due to undergo for a heart condition. Immediately

after the operation she developed a rare complication, leading to a massive stroke. She now lay in a coma, and the doctors feared the worst. According to the narrative (*ROTR* 1991, 156-161), when the distraught husband rang Chopra to tell him what had happened and to ask for advice, Chopra told him she was going to recover (ibid., 158).

> His wife was beyond both the art of medicine and the art of belief. We would have to start on the art of Being.
>
> Since he and his wife were both meditators, I said that we would go back to the self. We would simply know that she was going to recover, fully. I would have her in my attention when I went to bed at night, just before falling asleep. I asked her husband to do the same. But the key thing would be contacting the self through meditation.

Over the coming days, Chopra claims, the husband called back a number of times and each time there was more and more positive news about the wife's progress. In about six weeks' time, she was fully recovered. Chopra attributes the recovery to the power of meditation. Returning to his central motif of silence, Chopra notes:

> […] this woman and I, who had never seen one another, did not meet on the level of disease or even of personality. Something deeper had been stirred. We still played the same roles, in the sense that she was the patient asking me as physician for help. This time, however, she had asked in silence, and out of silence I had answered. It was as if a river of compassion ran beneath our feet, and unable to reach down for herself, she had asked me to reach for her (ibid., 160).

Chopra notes that this case marked a change in his own psychology, a change that 'progressively deepened' over time (ibid., 159-160). In his reckoning this particular patient was connected with him by a bond of love. What is remarkable is that rather than explain the process of healing in terms of the patient's (or her husband's) strength or resolve or ability for 'connection', he as the doctor now takes full credit for her recovery. He attributes his success in this case to his total willingness to accept the patient as his responsibility, with no fear of disease, no rejection of the patient, and no clinging to authority (ibid., 160). In this instance, it would seem, he 'transcended' the limitations of biomedicine. He also transcended the divide between self and patient, and between body and mind. And this, he claims, was not an isolated incident.

> More and more, I believe that the transcending can happen because I have come to feel, when I am face to face with patients, that I *am* them. I lose the sense that we are separate. We are not. I can feel their pain as they describe it. I can understand them without blame and want them to get well because I will be getting well myself (ibid., 160).

The strategies of legitimization in the narrative do not stop at legitimizing ayurveda. By this point, as will be readily evident, the narrative seeks to secure legitimacy for Chopra as a healing adept. By his own account, he is no 'ordinary' doctor; instead he is one with extraordinary abilities to heal, to ease suffering, and to restore wellbeing. He claims he can heal people by connecting with their inner selves in extraordinary ways, and bringing them back from the brink of death. Earlier in the narrative he describes Susruta, understood to be the compiler of one of the earliest ayurvedic texts, as an 'angelic doctor'. Susruta, he claims, bequeathed to ayurveda a view that man is infinite in scope. He had a mind that 'displayed infinite qualities'.

> More than a physician, he was a rishi, a seer. He had looked as deeply into Nature as our spirit can […]. Motivated by his own perfection, he approached patients, not as victims of malady, but as people who could potentially perfect themselves, too. That aspiration lies at the core of Ayurveda… (ibid., 70-71)

This term 'angelic doctor', it would seem, could as well now apply to Chopra.
The doctor's story of spiritual transformation is complete. The *rishi* now is Chopra himself, and '*The Return of the Rishi'* in the title of the book could as well refer to Chopra's 'return' to his 'true' selfhood and to a state of perfection, his realization of his own *rishi* value and 'infinite potential'.

The metaphorical cobra in Chopra's dream, it thus turns out, lives on not just through devout grandmothers, wandering ascetics, ayurvedic physicians like Triguna, and gurus like the Maharishi, but also in spiritually awakened individuals like Chopra. 'The truth may sink from public sight', Chopra writes, 'but somewhere it is flowing through a sage' (ibid., 144). This 'truth' flows through him now, following his encounter with the Maharishi, his reconnection with his Indian spiritual roots, and his personal experience of what it is to attain perfection through 'simple' practices like meditation. As a doctor and healer who combines biomedical knowledge with something more ancient and enduring -- the 'truth' of ayurveda -- he is now himself a fount of wisdom. Patients who

come to him for healing can drink directly from this fount, reconnecting with an ancient spiritual tradition that points towards human perfection.

Concluding remarks

Chopra frames his autobiography as the story of his return to his Indian roots. In his narrative he grows up in India somewhat alienated from these roots. In his adult life he practices biomedicine but gets increasingly disenchanted with mainstream forms of practice. It is when he is well into his thirties that he discovers Indic spirituality. Paradoxically it is in the US that he makes this discovery – through his encounter with TM. The 'Indian' legacy that Chopra claims to have discovered is not merely this; he also borrows from countercultural and other currents in the US, which he readily assimilates into his discourse and practice. Once Chopra makes his spiritual discovery, he sets about revisioning his work as a doctor, integrating his biomedical knowledge with ayurvedic healing, and developing a form of practice that centrally addresses the self, the mind, and the unleashing of human potential, which, he claims, lies at the heart of ayurveda. Through his writing, he seeks to share his discoveries with, and to educate, the general public about this form of healing.

Chopra's autobiography would seem, in the first instance, to be something of a 'conversion narrative' – the kind of story which portrays one's life as having had little positive meaning or value until, in a moment of revelation or through a chance meeting, it is 'totally transformed, re-routed onto different tracks, sent off in a new spiritual (and/or social) direction' (Arnold and Blackburn 2004,14). In Chopra's narrative, his past as biomedical doctor is portrayed as relatively value-less; this is contrasted with his meaningful present as a practitioner of mind-body medicine. The transformation from the one to the other takes place through a chance encounter with TM and its founder.

It is noteworthy, however, that Chopra affirms his own legitimacy as a healer not on the strength of his proximity to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and the latter's authority as a spiritual figure, but on the basis of his own personal experiences. As previously noted, it is a central tenet in the Western milieu of unchurched spirituality that truth must be validated through personal experience, not mediated by figures of authority. The claims of experts, scientists, or spiritual masters are mere claims until one has tested and verified their truth-value by means of one's own direct experience. The autobiography places Chopra's direct personal experience at the heart of its narrative. Chopra's direct

experience of the Maharishi's qualities of serenity and silence confirms Mahesh Yogi as a true *rishi.* Chopra's personal experience of transformation through meditation legitimizes TM and Maharishi Ayurveda as legitimate techniques of consciousness-based healing. Similarly, Chopra's direct experience of healing the sick using the power of his mind, as recounted in the autobiography, legitimizes the 'truth' of his extraordinary healing ability. The autobiography serves ultimately as Chopra's means of self-validation. The narrative in turn relies on validation from his readers and clients; their personal experience and affirmation of Chopra's professed spiritual wisdom and healing powers are critical to his sustained legitimization as an 'angelic doctor' who has realized the full potential of his innate '*rishi* value'.

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