Between Asuras and *Māyā*: The Hindu Aetiology of Suffering[1]

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Abstract:

Hinduism is a generic term for a variety of schools, sects and practices that share common sources, beliefs, and concepts, but also encompasses divergent doctrines and ways of life in a single religious, philosophical, and social system. Inside this multifaceted tradition different and contradictory religious aetiologies of human suffering can be identified. In the Vedas, suffering is caused by an external agent (i.e. a personal activity of gods or asuras, which men can appease by rituals, rites, sacrifices, amulets, etc.) or as a godly punishment for man's desires and anger. In Upanishads, suffering is related to karma, dharma, and samsara, as a natural consequence of the transgressions from this life or from past ones; the individual is the cause of his own suffering, by his karma. Seen in the wider picture of Vedanta, suffering has no substance, being part of the illusory empirical world that deserves no attention; assumed or self-provoked, empirical suffering suggests detachment from this world and turns attention to the reality of Brahman. We consider that these aetiologies of suffering influence Hindus' attitudes towards bodily pain and medical action, which can range from accepting treatment and pain relief as gifts from the gods (obvious especially in traditional medicine's mix of religion and magic) to ascetics' total indifference to bodily suffering.

Keywords: Hinduism, suffering, karma, Upanishads

Suffering is a universal experience which all religions of the world try to explain, make sense of it and try to remove it. The third largest

religion of the world, with about 900 million practitioners, Hinduism, developed an atypical approach to the problem of suffering. This took place because a variety of schools, sects and practices that share common sources, beliefs, and concepts, but also encompasses divergent doctrines and ways of life in a single religious, philosophical, and social system are included under the generic "umbrella" term of Hinduism. As Bowker notes, "It is the essence of Hinduism that there are many different ways of looking at a single object, none of which will give the whole view, but each of which is entirely valid in its own right" (Bowker 1970: 193). Considering these, we can characterize Hinduism in three words: diversity, complexity and dynamism. Consequently, the Hindu approach to suffering is also diverse, complex and dynamic (Anantharaman 2001: 100). As Gächer underlines,

> For characteristic of the Hindu is the capacity to hold many, often contradictory, beliefs in his head, either simultaneously or as circumstances require. Neither myths, nor philosophies, nor theologies, can free one from the actual experience of evil and suffering, but they do offer rational and emotional help to cope with life (Gächer 1998: 402).

In the present article we are trying to delineate the main Hindu perspectives on the aetiology of suffering, with special reference to illness and morbidity as physical sufferings. Purposely we took no notice of the natural causes of diseases and ailments, but to the spiritual ones, starting with demonic intervention in human life and ending with the lack of reality attributed to suffering in Advaita Vedānta.

1. The "supernatural" sources of suffering

Ancient Indian medicine considered two categories of causes of morbidity: the natural and the metaphysical. In the first category are the accidents, the worms and insects, the life regime, etc. In the second category are divine agency, demonic forces, the breach of taboos, sorcery, witchcraft, evil eye, etc. (Crawford 2003: 32).

We are interested here in the first two sources of illness from the second category: the divine agency and the demonic forces. But first we consider it necessary to state some specifics. Primarily, in Hinduism gods are ambivalent and it "is difficult to understand how far they themselves embody evil and play the part of evil", as Gächer notices. "They can be

good and bad, harmless and evil. The one thing that distinguishes the gods from humans and demons is their power, certainly not their benevolence" Secondly, there is no clear line between gods and demons. They are similar in their nature, but different in their function. In their fight with one another, as the same author underlines, "it is not always clear which of the two possible bearers of evil is or will play the role of the evil one" (Gächer 1998: 398, 400-401). Thirdly, gods on a particular spiritual path can be demons on another. The gods which personify evil and destruction also represent the opposite qualities (Daniélou 1985: 140; Bowker 1970: 205-206). These things being said, we will insist unilaterally on the demonic origin of suffering, being more accustomed to attribute evil to the demonic forces, than to divine beings.

1.1. The demonic aetiology of illness

Among the Aryans, disease was considered a manifestation of the will or power of supernatural beings, as a punishment for human sins or transgressions, or just as a mere caprice of a malevolent deity or evil spirit (Jayne 1925: 145). The deities who were made responsible for this were the asuras, a category of gods that included *daityas* (titans, demons and giants, descendants of Ditī and Kaśyapa, who warred against the gods) (Dowson 2000: 79), *dānavas* (giants descendants from Danu and Kaśyapa) (Dowson 2000: 83) and other descendants of Kaśyapa, but it did not include the *rākṣasas*, descendants of Pulastya, although asuras and *rākṣasas* are frequently used interchangeably to designate the demonic forces.

The word *asura*, a term with Indo-Iranian origin, and its variants *asurya* and *āsura* occurs 88 times in *Ṛgveda*, 71 times in the singular number, four times in dual, ten times in plural, three times as a first member of a compound, and three times as feminine *asuryā* (Bhargava 1983: 119). It occurs nineteen times as an abstract noun and the abstract form *asuratva*, 24 times. As mentioned in *Brāhmaṇas* and in the *Purāṇas*, the word derives from *asu*, meaning "breath" or "spirit", with the suffix *ra*. Another etymology is derived from the root *as*, which means „to be", denoting that asuras are forms of existence. Rāmāyaṇa derives it from "to wine" (surā), the sons of Diti who refused it (a-sura)

(1.45.). Another root might be as, meaning „to frighten away", representing the fearful aspect of deities (Daniélou 1985: 140). As Bhargava considers, "[...] the original meaning of the word appears to have been 'spirited' or 'courageous' from which developed the allied idea of 'powerful' or 'mighty'". With the meaning 'powerful' or 'mighty' it was initially used as an adjective, applied to the prominent deities (Indra, Agni, Varuṇa, etc.), kings, priests or inanimate objects. As an abstract noun it meant "mightiness," as Ahura of the Zoroastrians (Bhargava 1983: 119-120; cf. Dowson 2000: 28).

Concerning their genealogy, the asuras are also Prajāpati's offspring, being the older brothers of the gods (*Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.3.1.). *Taittirīya* and *Śatapatha Brāhmana* state that the asuras sprang to existence from the breath (*asu*) of Prajāpati or from his abdomen. The *Taittirīya Āranyaka* states that Prajāpati created "gods, men, fathers, *gandharvas*, and *apsarases*" from water. Asuras, *rākṣasas* (Night-Wanderers), and *piśācas* sprang from drops which were spilt. The same Prajāpatic genealogy is present in Manu, in *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (where they are born from Brahma's groin), and *Vāyu Purāṇa*, where they are also sons of Prajāpati's groin. *Danavas* and *daityas*, considered in the category of asuras, were the sons of Kasyapa-prajāpati, born from two of his wives: Danu and Ditī. Elsewhere they are the offspring of the thirteen daughters of Dakṣa (Daniélou 1985: 140-143; Dowson 2000: 29; Williams 2003: 66).

The later mythology depicts asuras as originally good, but for reasons at which can only be guessed (see for few suppositions Daniélou 1985: 141), towards the end of the Ṛgvedic period, asura's meaning radically changed. It became a noun with the meaning of demon (e.g. "godless asuras") or enemy of gods. The gods ceased to be called *asura*. Indra, Agni and Sūrya are *asurahan* (asura-slayers) (Bhargava 1983: 122-123).

Now *asura* is applied to demons like Vṛitra, Vala, Arbuda, Śuṣṇa and Śambara (Bhargava 1983: 124-124). As John Dowson considers, "In this sense a different derivation has been found for it: the source is no longer *asu*, 'breath', but the initial *a* is taken as the negative prefix, and *a-sura* signifies 'not a god'" (Dowson 2000: 29). Those spirits opposed to

gods where "non-gods" (*a-suras*). The asuras, *atrin* (eater) *daityas*, *dānavas*, *rākṣasas* (injurer), and *piśācas* (monsters), living in their mansions or fortresses in heavens or underworld, became the eternal enemies of the gods, a perspective that hallmarked the folk belief of the people of India (Jayne 1925: 147-148).

Originally just, good, charitable, possessors of many virtues, they became proud, vain, envious, cruel, seekers of pleasure, etc., characteristics that lead to a conflict with the gods, who remained bearers of their original attributes (Daniélou 1985: 141, 308). The theomachy is complicated and the *Brāhmaṇas* record many contests between good (gods) and evil (asuras), but in the end, the asuras ruled the world until gods, guided by Viṣṇu, killed them and captured the world (Dowson 2000: 28-29; Williams 2003: 22-24; Jones and Ryan 2007: 123; Daniélou 1985: 140). The "fallen" gods assimilated gradually the gods, demons, spirits, and ghosts of the non-Vedic populations of the Indian Subcontinent, reaching to name all the opponents of the Aryan gods, all the genii, and other descendants of the non-Aryan sage Kaśyapa (Daniélou 1985: 141-142). As Williams underlines, "Hindu theomachy never completely solved the problems involved in personifying the *devas* and the asuras and gave mixed messages about the sources of evil and the purposes for good" (Williams 2003: 22-24).

Consequently, as Patrick Olivelle suggests in a note of his translation, calling asuras demons is misleading because they are divine beings, children of the same creator (*The Early Upaniṣads* 1989: 489). Therefore, the difference between gods (*sura*) and anti-gods (*a-sura*) is not one of kind, but of degree. They represent "all that draws man away from the path of realization. They are those powerful instincts and attachments which keep man within the power of Natura (*prakṛti*), prevent his progress and obscure his intellect" (Daniélou 1985: 139).

With reference to morbidity, *Atharvaveda* mentions asuras as ones who trammel the cure, but not always as the main source of disease (Zysc 1985: 77). There are two texts that clearly express this attribute:

> The Asuras dig low down this great wound-healer; that is the remedy of flux; that has made the disease (*róga*) disappear (2.3.3.)
> The Asuras dug thee in; the gods cast thee up again, a remedy for the *vātīkṛta* likewise a remedy for what is bruised." (6.109.3).

Assuredly, asuras' names are frequently mentioned in relation with disease and morbidity.

Among the "supernatural" maleficent sources of illness and suffering, there are also *pretas* or *peys*, malevolent restless ghosts of sinful people. These vengeful, demanding, angry and greedy spirits provoke "bad" deaths and bring misfortune and suffering. They can possess women and children, making them crazy; can bring headaches, fits, intestinal pain, fever, etc. (Gächer 1998: 399).

The asuras and evil spirits are not the only evil sources of disease and suffering. The curse of an enemy, the evil eye, magic practices, etc. are also means to produce suffering (Jayne 1925: 152).

The demonic aetiology made healing a religious ritual, centred on identifying and removing the demon, frequently invoking gods. Hymns of *Atharvaveda*, which abound in healing charms and spells, are a classic example for the Aryan perception of disease and healing, anchored in magico-religious ideology (Crawford 2003: 32). There are gods with different competencies in healing different diseases, as the Aśvins, Indra or Rudra and his sons, but we cannot identify a doctor-god in the Vedas (Filliozat 1964: 86-91).

1.2. The "divine" source of suffering

The Vedas personify the forces and aspects of nature as gods. The consequence is that suffering can be understood as a result of a personal activity of the gods. Therefore, an appropriate relationship with particular deities can bring no or lesser suffering (Bowker 1970: 200). It seems that most frequently this appropriate relationship with gods is made through the proper ritual. Alongside their role to protect humans, the Vedic deities are also very "sensitive", being easily offended if people do not pay them proper attention in ritual. As a consequence, they become angry and express their dissatisfaction by punishing with misfortune and suffering. As Gächer pins down,

This suffering can serve as a way of restraining and reprimanding those bad people who make mistakes when performing religious rituals or go against the rules of purity or the social rules of family and caste; they will be afflicted with disaster, especially in the form of a contagious illness, epidemics, etc. Not only individuals, but entire groups may be thus afflicted, if, for example, the yearly festivals are not held at the right time or are performed in a sloppy way. The

deities need not always be benevolent, let alone friendly. Their veneration is not just an intermezzo, something that can be left out. Thus disaster, suffering and evil can be controlled (Gächer 1998: 400).

The vengeful gods are especially feminine deities, who bring and spread blindness, smallpox, chicken pox, cholera, plague, and measles. Dyāmavva and Durgavva, for example, are responsible for epidemics. Yellamma is responsible for eczema, swellings, ulcers, mumps, venereal diseases, and leprosy (Gächer 1998: 400).

Another dimension of morbidity sent by gods is the punitive one for moral transgressions. As Crawford and Filliozat note,

> [...] a link is early formed between behaviour ('sin') and disease conceived as the punitive visitation of the gods (Crawford 2003: 32).
> All the causes of disorders are, therefore, related or allied; they belong to the domain of the sin, to the violation of the norm and they affect, for most of the time, the healthy being like an impurity wiped off on him. That is why efforts are often made to treat them by the ritual of wiping off or of effacement as also by means of prayers (Filliozat 1964: 97).

The most representative god who sanctions sins through disease is Varuṇa, a god with healing attributes among Vedic deities, the most prominent "gracious healer", but who also punishes with disease the violators of moral law, as the guardian of *ṛta* (*Atharvaveda* IV.16.7) (Crawford 2003: 32; Filliozat 1964: 91ff). Bowker assimilates the Vedic god Varuṇa with later karma, as a personified form of it. Varuṇa's duty, as a foundation and guarantee of natural and moral law, was to punish human transgressions. When the concept of karma became more popular, the importance of Varuṇa fell away and ended up as the god of death. What Varuṇa's attributes suggest is that

> the gods could not be made an excuse for irresponsible behaviour or for the occurrence of suffering. Furthermore, the existence of suffering was not seen as being brought to bear on men entirely from the outside; it was recognised that much evil and suffering is a result of internal desire and anger, or in other words, of men who have lost control of themselves [...] (Bowker 1970: 201-202).

There are also gods such as Śiva, Rudra, and Kālī, who personify the evil and the destructive tendencies in the universe. Śiva represents "the tendency of all things to move towards dissolution and destruction." This attribute of Śiva is personified in Bhairava, "the terrible destroyer".

"He is the one who wields the thunderbolt, he is armed with innumerable arrows, and he drives in his chariot like a destroying wind razing the earth as he goes". Another destructive aspect of Śiva is goddess Kālī, the power of time (Bowker 1970: 204). There is also Nirṛti (or Alakṣmī), the goddess representing misery, disease and death, who was born from the ocean and was the embodiment of all sins. She is the sister of Lakṣmī, the wife of Sin (Adharma), daughter-in-law of Varuṇa and mother of evil-omens (*nairṛta*), demons (*rākṣasas*), Death (Mṛtyu), Fear (Bhaya) and Terror (Mahābhaya) (Daniélou 1985: 121, 138). According to *Mahābhārata*, "She is the embodiment of all sins... the one who has dominion over gambling, women, sleep, poverty, disease and all other kinds of trouble. She is the wife of lawlessness (*adharma*), the son of Varuṇa. Her sons are death, fear and terror" (Mahābhārata 1.67.52, apud Bowker 1970: 203-204).

The gods which personify suffering represent the view that apparent suffering is not evil or afflictive in advance. Basically, suffering is a part of the universe of being and it may be very beneficial as a foundation for better things or as a source of dissatisfaction with the worldly objects, which leads to *mokṣa*. Although the *saṁsāra* belief is not very well developed in the Vedas, such concepts as *karma* and māyā are already present. And suffering is ultimately assimilated with the illusion of this world (Bowker 1970: 207), as we will discuss hereinafter.

2. The Upaniṣadic aetiology of suffering

Upaniṣads are Vedānta, the end or consumption of the Vedas, and emerged as a reaction to the Vedic ritualism. We can consider that Upaniṣads express in a completely abstract discourse the same idea as the Vedas do in mythological terms. It is a more profound interpretation of the same truth that the Vedas depicted. This development of perspective applies also to the view of suffering (Bowker 1970: 209). In the teachings of Upaniṣads, two explanations of the origin of suffering arise: karma and *māyā*.

2.1. The karmic origin of suffering

We do not intend to speculate here on multiple theorisations about karma and its evolution, especially considering that it is already a familiar concept to the Western world. In short, "the actions or karmas of individuals in their current births shape their lives in their next births" (Jones and Ryan 2007: 228). Appling this to suffering, the suffering experienced now is the natural consequence of bad personal deeds, words or thoughts from past lives or from the current life. Thus suffering is a kind of "self-acquired" state. This perspective connects morality with suffering. The individual acquires, in this existence or in the future ones, the fruits of his own deeds and thoughts (Bowker 1970: 215).

As Gächer notes, „It is the fault neither of God, of people, nor of a demon; it is all part of the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth; everything will eventually be rectified and equalized. Such an understanding of karma partly explains the spread of evil and the guilt of the individual [...]" (Gächer 1998: 400; cf. Clooney 1989: 532). Understanding that present suffering is the consequence of personal previous actions excludes randomization of happiness and suffering in this world and gives a satisfying answer to questions like "why me?" or "is it fair?". Additionally, experiencing current suffering has a purifying effect over future lives. It satisfies the debt and consumes the negative energy (Whitman 2007: 609). Consequently, assuming suffering in this life gives hope for better rebirths.

The moral quality of facts is given by reporting them to *dharma*, the eternal law. The Dharma-śāstra texts mention lists of sins and transgressions, next to their consequences over present or future existences (Glucklich 2003: 56). It concludes that suffering is a consequence of transgressing *dharma*. It does not work as a punishment, but as a consequence. It does not imply a judge-god, but it does not exclude the existence of gods. According to Clooney,

> The activity of Brahman is, in fact, unchanging and everywhere uniform, but this uniform causality interacts differently with each set of local conditions, each person as constituted by his or her deeds; it is like the rain that falls uniformly on all things and with the same potency, but interacting with each so that each may grow according to its own inner capacity. Brahman "catagorises" the deeds of each into good and bad results (Clooney 1989: 532).

The doctrine of karma was integrated in the Ayurveda, the Hindu traditional medical system. According to *Caraka Saṁhitā*,

Deeds in previous lives are known as 'Daiva' (divine) and those from the present life as 'Paurusha' (pertaining to man). These in an unbalanced manner cause diseases and, similarly, divert them. (Sharirasthana, II.44).

And

Past karmas are called 'Daiva' (karmas) and are observed as the cause of diseases in time. There is no great karma (action) in which the fruit is not enjoyed (reaped). Diseases caused by *karmaja* (karmic factors) neutralise therapeutic measures and subside only on the destruction of deeds (which have caused them). (Sharirasthana I.116-117).

As Crawford comments,

This means that if somebody has a congenital infirmity due to bad karma in a previous incarnation *(daiva),* and if he does something medically good about it *(puruṣakara),* he can offset the severity of the ailment, and have a happy life. The opposite is also true. The formula, therefore, for happiness is to match noble *karman* performed in a previous life *(daiva)* with noble *karman (puruṣakara)* done here and now. On the other hand, if both actions are base, unhappiness will follow in kind; and if both are moderate, life will be moderate (Crawford 2003:51).

The conclusion is that Ayurvedic medicine slightly changes the significance of karma, moving the accent from an implacable destiny acquired in past lives to the role of actual deeds and intensions. Accordingly, keeping healthy and seeking medical help became legitimate (Crawford 2003: 52-54).

2.2. Suffering in the context of *māyā*

Beyond the karmic aetiology, which stipulates that everything that exists in this world, from demons to gods, suffers because lives inside saṁsāra, suffering was included and interpreted in the wider philosophical context of Vedanta. Based on Upaniṣads, the Vedantine philosophy speculates that the universe is basically undifferentiated. It is perceived as a diverse reality because of illusion (*māyā*) and ignorance (*avidyā*). The main cause of rebirths and suffering is *avidyā*, the ignorance of the true nature of the reality and of the existence in the inauthentic, unreal and painful universe, where the true Self is tied down

and imprisoned (Klostermaier 1984: 246). The real Self (ātman) is pure existence *(sat),* pure consciousness *(cit),* and pure bliss *(ānanda)*, immortal and free, but man cannot see this because of his ignorance. He is not the real subject of suffering. As *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states, the real Self „is ungraspable, for he cannot be grasped. He is undecaying, for he is not subject to decay. He has nothing clinging to him, for he does not cling to anything. He is not bound; yet he neither trembles in fear nor suffers injury." (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.15)

In this context, "suffering belongs to the world of *māyā* and *saṁsāra*, and that by seeing the relativity of suffering an individual is able to progress on the way of *mokṣa*" Accordingly, although the experience of suffering is real enough, it is only relative. It differs from the ultimate reality and results from the attachment to the transient, phenomenal world. Only to the man who lives in illusion, "the world […] appears to consist of conflicting opposites, of evil and good, of pain and pleasure, of suffering and healing" (Bowker 1970: 197, 212-214).

In essence, what creates suffering is attachment to this illusory world, understood as over involvement in this delusory life. Ignorance makes humans unable to see the true reality and their true Self. Unable to see reality, they attach to the illusion of the world. This attachment caters rebirth, perpetuating the "terrible bondage" of *saṁsāra*. Rebirth means abiding suffering (Whitman 2007: 609).

But once man removes the veil of *māyā* and *avidyā* through knowledge, he attains *mokṣa*, liberation from *saṁsāra* and implicitly from suffering. As *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* points out, „When he perceives this immense, all-pervading self, as bodiless within bodies, as stable within unstable beings a wise man ceases to grieve." (2:22) Also *Mahābhārata*:

> In this respect it is said that they (who) are possessed of wisdom, beholding that the world of life is overwhelmed with sorrow both bodily and mentally, and with happiness that is sure to end in misery, never suffer themselves to be stupefied… Happiness and misery, prosperity and adversity, gain and loss, death and life, in their turn, wait upon all creatures. For this reason the wise man of tranquil self would neither be elated with joy nor be depressed with sorrow (apud Bowker 1970: 224).

Until reaching this state of knowledge (*jñāna*), suffering will always be present in human life. As Whitman notices, "Hindu tradition holds that

as we are in human form on earth, we are bound by the laws of our world and will experience physical pain. Pain is truly felt in our current physical bodies; it is not illusory in the sense of not really being felt. But while the body may be in pain, the Self or soul is not affected or harmed." (Whitman 2007: 609)

Quoting Bowker,

> The attitudes toward suffering and the proper response to it in this setting are: first, that suffering is brought about primarily through a mistaken view of the self and the world. Our common perception of self is dualistic. We therefore attribute a level of reality to the self as we know it that in its true nature it does not have. Suffering affects only the false self; therefore, we are ultimately mistaken when we attribute reality to the nature of suffering. As long as we perpetuate the false sense of self, then we will suffer, or appear to suffer. Of course, to the false self this suffering is real enough, and it is here that some positive good can be seen in suffering. Suffering can produce the thought that what we take as the real self is in fact not the real self, and can thus occasion movement toward insight into the real self. In this sense, suffering can act as a catalyst to precipitate the movement toward spiritual liberation (Taylor and Whatson 1989: 18).

The consequence of this logic is that suffering, be it physical, psychological or existential, is not real. The immediate attitude is to cultivate greater and greater detachment, as opposed to the attachment which creates suffering. As *Bhagavadgītā* later stated,

> You grieve for those beyond grief, and you speak words of insight; but learned men do not grieve for the dead or the living. Never have I not existed, nor you, nor these kings; and never in the future shall we cease to exist (2.11-12).

> Contacts with matter make us feel heat and cold, pleasure and pain. Arjuna, you must learn to endure fleeting things—they come and go! When these cannot torment a man, when suffering and joy are equal for him and he has courage, he is fit for immortality (2.14).

The immediate conclusion is that the proper response to suffering is detachment and seeing it in a relative perspective. This is not an intellectual manifesto or an escapist attitude, but a proper standpoint in the light of knowledge of the true reality and Self (Bowker 1970: 229; Taylor and Whatson 1989: 18-19; Whitman 2007: 609).

Conclusions

Considering the above and applying them in the field of medical practice, we have three situations. According to the Vedas, illness is caused by an exterior agent (demon or deity) and the solution is to remove the suffering through religious or cvasireligious meanings (exorcisms, spells, incantations, etc.). Sometimes this approach attends on medical treatment, sometimes it is the only cure and replaces any qualified medical intervention. In *karmamārga*, the path of karma, illness is caused by an inside agent (bad karma accumulated in prior or actual lives) over which, at least in theory, there is no control. In this context, the medical aid removes the symptoms, but not the source. Although Ayurveda somehow harmonized the fatalistic view of karma with the active call for medical treatment, there still prevails the belief, especially in desperate passes, (1) that the fate is already prescribed by past life deeds and (2) that any interference in the prescribed destiny make things worse, producing more bad karma, which finally will determine the quality of the next life. Sharing this belief, many Hindu devotees manifest a reserve towards alleviating suffering. Finally, according to *jnanamārga*, illness is just an illusion, without real existence. Although this perspective is not at everybody's hand, it encourages an ascetic indifference toward illness and curing it.

Considering these, healthcare professionals should be aware that devout Hindu patients sometimes share different values concerning illness and medical aid and be attentive in exploiting beliefs in the patients' best interest without trenching their religious convictions.

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