



**Avicenna's concept of soul-body relation  
And his holistic methods to cure some psycho-physical maladies**



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Nearly a century ago Sir William Osler (d. 1919) professor of Medicine at John Hopkins University in Baltimore and then at Oxford wrote: 'The care of tuberculosis depends more on what the patient has in his head than what he has in his chest.' That people who are depressed, stressed, lonely or bereaved, become ill more easily than those who are content. And that the reactions to body and mind to injury or disease sometimes depend as much on the attitude of mind as they do on medical treatment.'<sup>1</sup> He was simply expressing the dominance of mind (or soul) over the body.

Such observations on the influence of the soul on the body were also found by Avicenna more than a thousand years back when treating patients about which he has written in his *Canon* the medical work which was a standard text for the medicine both in the East and West till 18<sup>th</sup> century, and in his philosophical works such as *Al-Shifâ* (The Healing), *Ilm al-Nafs* (The science of soul), *Al-Ishârât wa al-Tanbihât* (Remarks and Admonitions). In this paper I will highlight his research on the influence of soul on the body to which it is connected and in the case of certain type of soul the transcendence of that influence to the other bodies and souls and the environment, and Avicenna's explanation for that influence. I will end this paper by pointing to some research which has been conducted in the above area by some contemporary psychologists. I must admit that I am not a physician by profession; my area of interest and research lies in Islamic philosophy, especially the aspect of science of soul.

### **I. Avicennan Universe:**

At the outset it is deemed necessary that I state in brief the universe in which Avicenna lived and conceptualized for that has an impact on his philosophical and medical works. He was a Persian, came from an Islamic religious background, his parents were Ismaili Shia, he finished learning and memorizing the Islamic scripture Qur'an by the time he was eighteen, he was a physician, philosopher, a commentator on several verses of the Qur'an and a mystic. But mystic not in the sense of being part of any sufi order but in the sense of a gnostic ('*ârif*) as is shown by the research of Henry Corbin in his *Avicenna and the visionary recital*, by Shams Inati in the introduction to her work on *Ibn Sînâ and Mysticism*.<sup>2</sup> At the apex of the universe in which he lived and breathed is Being the Necessary Existence. All existents beginning from the Intellects, souls, the planetary system, the sublunary world are possible beings and derive their being from the Necessary Being and are interconnected through the Necessary Being. Matter is the lowest level of Being and it is something obscure. Though it has a degree of existence, but it is a weak degree and consists of the potency for the existence of things emanated on it and get united with it as the unification of matter and form in existence, and the unification of genus and differentia in quiddity. Since it has some kind of being, so according to this concept, the matter or body is not something dead and passive, subject

only to the external pushes of the efficient causation but the lowest level of Being having some purpose and desire.

This was to some extent Aristotelian view of matter modified by Avicenna. For Aristotle as well, the mental qualities were inherent in all matter. Aristotle saw teleology, and purposefulness everywhere, as is seen by Avicenna. Higher than the matter in existence is the mineral, then the plant, then the animal and finally the man. Externally they are multiple but internally they are united with and connected to each other [in being]. So the whole cosmos, according to Avicenna, is Being with its attributes either intense or weak. The life pervades not only in the human, animal and plant worlds, but in all beings outside of the four elements which are the principles of the physical manifestation. These are the same principles which constitute the human body and through their combination give rise to the humors, qualities and temperaments.<sup>3</sup> So the external world of man is also comprised of the elements possessing various natures, therefore there is a constant action and reaction between the total external environment of man and the humors which include the food and water he eats and drinks and even cosmic forces further removed from him.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the Avicennian universe is an organic whole of which all the parts behave as members of a single organism. In his *risâlah fi'î-Ishq* (The *Treatise on Love*),<sup>5</sup> Avicenna describes the bond of Divine Love by which all things in the universe hang together and on account of which especially every lower being yearns for its superior from which certain potencies peculiar to it emanate into the former

## 2: Human soul

Human soul, according to Avicenna, is a simple intellectual existence, which is one of the Forms in the knowledge of God. It is created when the proper human body for its use is created so that the created body becomes its kingdom and instrument.<sup>6</sup> The (immediate) cause of the soul is the Active Intellect, which in his cosmology is the tenth Intellect. The nature of the body to which it connects is from the elements of the world and it has particular human temperament.<sup>7</sup> When the soul emanates on the body it makes it alive.

Now why does the soul join the body? According to Avicenna, the soul joins the body which it takes it as its instrument to acquire gnosis (*ma'ârif*) and knowledge (*'ilm*) so that its substance becomes perfect and it has the gnosis of God, the knowledge of the realities of the objects of knowledge whereby it becomes fortunate to return to the (divine) Presence and become one of His angels. This, according to Avicenna, is the position of the divine sages or metaphysicians, and divine knowers. The people of spiritual discipline and spiritual unveiling agree with them. For they have witnessed the substances of their souls at the detachment from their bodies and connecting with the divine lights. We have, he says, several demonstrations for the soundness of this position.<sup>8</sup>

Another issue is: If it is intellectual Form then it is non-material, so how can it connect to the corporeal body which is material? This was the dilemma for Descartes in 17<sup>th</sup> century which eventually resulted in his concept of duality between mind and body which subsequently affected the Western philosophic thought as well as the fields of medicine

and psychology. This problem did not exist for Avicenna and because the body conceived by him is the lower level of being and soul as higher than it in being, so they are connected to each other in being.

### 3. The connecting link between soul and body.

Since the substance of the soul is subtle and from the celestial world and the world of pure intellect so it does not dispose in the gross elemental organs of the body except through the intermediary relating both sides. This is a warm subtle body which is the first bearer of all the powers of the soul. It is called *rûh* also translated as breath due to its root from *rîh* and the similarity between the word *rûh* and *rîh*. It is created from the mixture of the subtle vaporous humors as the organs (of the body) are created from the gross mixture of these humors. If the powers [of the soul] are not able to penetrate through (this subtle) body then there would be blockage preventing the (penetration of) sensation and movement to them. If this body was not very subtle then it would not penetrate through the walls of the nerves. This breath in the heart is called animal spirit, in the brain is called vital spirit, and in the liver it is called natural spirit.<sup>9</sup>

In Avicenna's words: "God the Most High created the left side of the heart, and made it hollow in order that it should serve both as a storehouse of breath and the seat of manufacture of the breath. He also created the breath to enable the faculties of the soul to be conveyed in the corresponding members. He produced the breath out of the finer particles of the humors and out of igneity, and at the same time produced the tissues themselves out of the coarser and terrene particles of these humors. In other words, the breath is related to the subtle particles of the same humors.<sup>10</sup> It is this principle breath associated with the heart that is identified with the force of life itself and is a link between the corporeal, subtle and spiritual aspect of man's being.

So when any psychic quality occurs in the soul, its effect transcends from it to the breath, and through it descends in the body. Whenever the bodily state occurs to the body its effect rises from it to the soul through the breath. So the soul and body are parallel to each other and imitate each other due to the connection of cause and caused between the two in some way. Just as the substance of each one imitates the substance of the other, its quality the quality of the other, its passivity the passivity of the other, its transformation the transformation of the other, so is the case with the breath which is a barrier between the two. If the psychic quality such as pleasure is created in [the soul] be it intellectual or imaginative, then due to it the expansion of the balanced breath is created in the brain, and through its mediation the excitation of the body, the manifestation of the clear blood, and the flushing of the face.

If the fear or pain is created in the soul, the breath constricts towards the interior, and through it the constriction in the body takes place [which is visible through] the paleness of face. So is the case with the rest of the psychic qualities and their occurrences in the body. And vice-versa, the abundance of breath results in cheerfulness and vivaciousness. Its decrease results in epilepsy, stroke, sadness, sorrow, and melancholia. Thus this is one aspect of the soul-body relation. Another aspect is, the anger stirs up the vital power and

causes the breath (*rûh*) to expand all at once. Hence the pulse is large, rises high, and is swift and brisk. In delight the movement is gradual and outward. The pulse does not become as speedy and brisk as in the case of anger, but its volume is adequate for the resistance, and therefore the pulse is slow and infrequent. In joy the pulse is similar to the preceding. In grief the heat is extinguished, or choked, nearly to obliteration and the vital power is weakened. Hence the pulse is small, weak, and sluggish. In fear, if of sudden origin, the pulse becomes quick, irregular and disorderly.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. The power of intention and imagination and their effect on one's body:

The faculty of imagination, according to Avicenna, is one of the powers of the soul that brings together sensory things, which have matter, shapes and forms, and intellectual matters which have no shape or form. In other words, it is cognitive imagination, or intelligence with shapes, forms and extension. It perceives ideas in sensory forms and thus it is situated between spirit or intelligence and body. It also preserves what the *sensus communis* receives from the five external senses. Its domain is the end of the first cavity (of the brain), and its instrument is the breath of the brain.<sup>12</sup>

The most common form of the influences of the soul on the body through intention is in the sphere of voluntary movement of the body which Avicenna describes in the *Al-Nafs*.<sup>13</sup> When one wishes or wills to move the body in a certain direction towards a certain object, the bodily faculties, if in sound health, obey forthwith. The metaphysical explanation of this ordinary phenomenon is that it is in the nature of matter to obey the higher principle which is the soul. He further states about the power of suggestion exercised by imagination whereby the emotions are stirred up and bodily members moved and I quote: "We do not regard it impossible that something should occur to the soul in so far as it is in the body and is then followed by affections peculiar to the body itself. Imagination, too, in as much as it is knowledge, is not in itself a bodily affection, but it may happen that at its intensity certain bodily (i.e. sexual) organs should expand. This is not through any physical cause which necessitates a change in the temperament ... and causes the expansion of the organ. Indeed, when a form obtains in the imagination, it necessitates a change in the temperament resulting in heat, humidity and air, which, but for that form, there is nothing to produce." Avicenna goes on: "We say that on the whole it is the nature of the soul that through it changes occur in the temperament of the bodily matter without any bodily action or affection. Thus heat and cold are produced without there being a hot or cold body. So when an image becomes strong and firm in the soul, the bodily matter is quick to accept a corresponding form or quality. This is because the substance of the soul is (derived from) certain (higher) principles (i.e. Active Intellects) which clothe the matter with forms contained in them, such that these forms actually constitute matter."

Avicenna has described this influence at different levels. For instance, the anger stirs up the vital power and causes the breath (*rûh*) to expand all at once. Hence the pulse is large, rises high, and is swift and brisk. In delight the movement of the breath is gradual and outward. The pulse does not become as speedy and brisk as in the case of anger, but its volume is adequate for the resistance, and therefore the pulse is slow and infrequent. In joy the pulse is similar to the preceding. In grief the heat is extinguished, or choked,

nearly to obliteration and the vital power is weakened. Hence the pulse is small, weak, and sluggish. In fear, if of sudden origin, the pulse becomes quick, irregular and disorderly.<sup>14</sup>

The other effect of the domination of soul on its body is: “the vegetative faculty becomes either weak or strong when the soul becomes conscious of certain judgments which it likes or dislikes, both this like and dislike not being physical at all. This happens when a judgment takes place in the soul: the judgment does not influence the body as a pure belief but rather when this belief is followed by an affection of joy or grief. Now, joy and grief too are something perceived by the soul and do not affect the body as such but influence the vegetative faculty. Thus joy, which is an occurrence in the rational soul, intensifies the action of the vegetative faculty, while the opposite affection of grief, which also occurs in the rational soul and is not bodily pain, weakens and destroys the action of the vegetative faculty. Indeed it can shatter the very temperament of the body.”<sup>15</sup> The vegetative faculty, according to Avicenna’s psychology consists of the powers of nutrition, growth and reproduction.

Next, Avicenna gives a medical example from abnormal psychology: “Consider the case of a really sick man who firmly believes he has become well and of a (physically) healthy man who is obsessed by the idea that he is ill. It often happens that in such cases, when the idea becomes firmly fixed in the imagination, the bodily matter is accordingly affected and health or illness ensues. In such cases, the efficacy of imagination and intention is greater than any doctor could achieve by instruments and media.” “This is the reason”, he goes on, “that a man can run fast on a plank of wood when it is put across a well-trodden path, but when it is put like a bridge over a chasm, he would hardly be able to creep over it. This is because he pictures to himself a (possible) fall so vividly that the natural power of his limbs accords with it.”<sup>16</sup>

Many case histories are attributed to him of detecting the mental illness and curing it that have become part and parcel of Persian literature, and have transcended the bounds of medical science. Some of the stories have been adopted and transformed into gnostic tales such his cure of a prince. The story goes as follows which is mentioned by Muhammad Qazvîni (d. circa. 1150 A.C.) in his *Chahâr Maqâleh*<sup>17</sup> that a prince from the family of Qâbus Vashamghîr the king of Gurgân became very ill. Several physicians were called to cure him but they could not. Avicenna in those days was in Gurgân and had treated many patients and cured them. So his fame reached the king and he was called for the treatment of the prince. To be brief, Avicenna soon found out by his illness by looking at him. For his outward expression told him of the inner condition; the disorder in the spirit, mind, and body was clearly manifested outwardly. So by putting his hand on the pulse of his wrist he started questioning him about his personal life and thereby found out that the prince was in love with a woman and since she was a commoner there was no possibility of getting married to her. This he found out through his intense concentration on the pulse when listening to the answer of the prince. For whenever the place of his beloved, the street in which she lived, the house in which she dwelt were mentioned the pulse changed in movement.

In modern time it is called polygraph or the lie detector. The difference between Avicennan method of detecting the mental illness and the polygraph is the polygraph is a

mechanical device to detect the lie from an alleged criminal, and it is not used to detect the mental illness of the patients. In Avicenna's method one finds the sympathetic approach of a physician towards a patient who with great insight and concentration of mind plus the medical knowledge is able to detect the cause of illness instead of rushing to give drugs to the mentally ill patient and thereby making his physical and mental condition worse than before. So Avicenna by his philosophical medicine found out the cause of the illness of the prince which was his emotional trauma and passion for the woman whom he loved and assumed that he could not marry which had affected his body.

All these examples show the effect of mental representations, emotions and intention on one's own physiology, the correlation of positive and negative mental representation and intention with physiological effects. The soul, according to him, has a greater influence on the physical being than the physical body has on the soul. In his treatise *On Prayer*, he maintains the effect of prayer on the health. He distinguishes between an inner spiritual prayer and the outer physical ritual, e.g. ablution, chanting certain formulae, making certain bodily movements. What, he asks, can be the benefit of the latter? And he answers that thereby the human body receives from the heavenly bodies or the Active Intellect certain influences whereby it is conserved and kept in health.

##### **5. The Sympathy and action at a distance: effect of mental representation and intention outside one's body:**

Now "the originated body" according to Avicenna, "is the soul's kingdom and instrument, and in the substance of the soul which originates simultaneously with the body, a body whose existence has called forth the soul's origination from the primary principles, there is a natural impulse to occupy itself with the body, to use it, to care for it and to be attracted towards it. These conditions become peculiar to the soul and turn it away from all other bodies."<sup>18</sup> "In the case of ordinary human beings then, the direct influence of the soul is restricted to its own body, while the exceptional souls of the prophets and saints, by becoming World souls as it were become operative throughout Nature. If the human temperament, he states, becomes affected by the mental representations and imaginations, be they common imaginations or the imaginations intensively affective at the beginning of primordial nature of the soul, or have become [intense] gradually through habit and disciplines, then it is not surprising, that some souls have the divine power like the Soul of the world to which the elements obey like the obedience of its body. Hence, whenever the soul increases in separation [from the material attachment] it resembles the higher Principles, and its power and effecting increases in whatever is below it [in the level of existence]. This is so in the case of the prophets, the friends of God [or saints], and it has been proved in metaphysics, states Avicenna, that matter is obedient to the existentially powerful souls and is affected by them. The soul of such a person can 'cure the sick and make evil persons sick, disintegrate and integrate organisms. By his will the rain and fertility is created, and by his will ruins and prosperity, the sinking of the earth and plague occur... The elements by nature follows (such a powerful soul) and its obedience to it is more than its obedience to the contrary (humors) affecting it, so whatever is represented in his will is generated"... "the beasts submit to him and or no bird flees from him."

In the *Treatise Concerning the Visitation of Shrines*<sup>20</sup> he gives more or less the same idea that when several bodies meet together in the proximity of the body of a saint (or a prophet) or, in a sacred place, they become powerful in sympathetically moving the forces of the Supreme realm. Now such phenomena in modern times are considered to be part of parapsychology, but why and how they are caused? The parapsychologists do not have any clear answer.

Also, in the sphere of the soul's influence on other bodies, Avicenna states some emotional influences like jealousy operating in the case of the 'evil-eye', others are voluntary, e.g. suggestion or hypnotism by concentration of the imaginative faculty (*al-wahm al-'amil*) which affect the external bodies. What is required, according to Avicenna, for such an influence is a fixed idea or determination (*hay'at al-'aqd*) in the soul.<sup>21</sup>

Avicenna also affirms the reality of black magic and the power of magician to influence others, but he adds: "When a man possesses this (psychic power of influencing other bodies) but is evil and misemploys it in working mischief, he is an evil magician. By his excessive indulgence in this, the powerful quality of his soul disintegrates (gradually) and he has no influence where there are sages."<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

A viewpoint that has become more commonly accepted recently, both in abnormal psychology and in medicine is the psychosomatic viewpoint. It is also called the holistic approach to the mind-body problem and arose from the questions concerning the etiology of disease. Some diseases and mental disorders are clearly organic, and can be explained in physiological terms. Others are mental and behavioral disorders for which it is difficult to find a clearly defined organic cause; these are traced to psychological causes such as stress, anxiety, feelings of hostility and mental conflict. They show the intimate relationship between psyche and soma and form the basis for the psychosomatic or holistic viewpoint.

The holistic approach in medicine maintains that every illness, organic or mental, is an illness of the whole organism. Therefore the organism should not be considered as two separate entities, but as one unified, psycho-biological whole. This psycho-somatic viewpoint is to some extent in line with Avicenna's concept of soul-body relation.

In 1998, forty scientists from universities and research laboratories around the United States gathered at Swedenborg Chapel at Harvard University for a three-day conference jointly sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences and the Harvard School of Medicine. Their focus was to examine and evaluate data on a remarkable phenomenon baffling to modern medical science. Preliminary data presented to this conference suggested that we are on the verge of an explosion of evidence to support the efficacy of distant healing through prayer or mental intent.<sup>23</sup> The issue for the medical scientist is: "Is it possible in principle for individuals to influence by mental representations or prayer at a distance, the physiological function of a living organism? Can such an effect influence animals? Scores of controlled studies have demonstrated the correlation of positive or negative

mental representations, individual thoughts, feelings and emotions with physiological effects. But how that happens? Are there certain biological pathways that are specifically affected by prayers, mental representations, intention and imagery? These issues have not been answered because still there is the shadow of Descartes' philosophy of dichotomy between mind and body which looms over these fields of knowledge. In one of the articles presented to the Harvard's Mind/Body Institute by Lezotte, the author states: "We must seek to understand the interconnection between mind and body and resist the temptation to reduce everything to observable measurable "science" as we see it was the very mistake made by our Enlightenment predecessors that caused dissociation of mind and body in the first place."<sup>24</sup>

In the recent studies on imagery in healing, the author Jeanne Achterberg of California has done an extensive research of many cultural and religious groups from the earliest time till present day about the role of imagery and intention in either healing or causing illness of the body and mind and distant healing.<sup>25</sup>

In Avicenna's philosophy and medical experience of soul-body relation one finds many observations which are being looked into in modern times by psychologists and in some sectors of medical science but Avicennan world view is not a secular world view but a religious world. He saw the body of man as an extension of his soul and closely related to both the spirit and the soul. He was concerned with the interpenetration and interrelation of cosmic forces and the effect of these forces upon man. He was aware of the 'sympathy' between all orders of existence and mutual action and reaction of one creature upon the other.

The higher in existential intensity affects the lower in existential intensity. The whole cosmos is connected, interactive and alive due to the Necessary being and there is the connection and interconnection with the existents of the whole universe on the basis of divine Love and sympathy. His medicine is plunged deeply into his metaphysical view of man as a microcosm. For Avicenna the study of the body of man intricately related to that of human soul, because in his words: "The body and soul form one complete whole in one single being." The science of the human body, therefore, is also connected with and leads to the science of the origin of things.<sup>26</sup>

So he brought together the knowledge of medicine, philosophy, physics and spiritual science in his treatment of many physical illnesses whose cause could be mental and emotional. In his attempt to view man as a whole, as a single entity in whom body and soul are united and in seeking to relate man to the total cosmic environment in which he lives, Avicenna has remained faithful to the unifying spirit of Islam, the unifying vision of man as an entity in whom body and soul are closely intertwined, and in whom the state of health is realized through harmony and equilibrium.

It is essentially for his penetration and his understanding of the philosophical principles of medicine on the one hand, and the mastery of the psychological treatment of the physical ailments, or of "psycho-somatic medicine" on the other hand, that he is celebrated.

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