

Health in the Huxleyan tropical island of Pala

Summary

Huxley's *Island: a novel* (1962) is a parable on "realistic idealism" – set in an imaginary island situated in the Indian ocean between Sri Lanka and Sumatra, called Pala. The characters in the story include a doctor, a nurse and several patients. The general importance of health as a basic human need is well recognised. *Vis medicatrix naturae*, the natural healing powers of the body, are taken account of, along with psychotherapy and drugs. Prevention of illness is emphasised and doctors get paid for keeping people well. Since health and illness are influenced by a multitude of factors, "we attack on all the fronts at once... from diet to auto-suggestion, from negative ions to medication".

Introductory

I joined as a new recruit to then Department of Physiology, Pharmacology and Biochemistry in the University of Ceylon in 1949. I found myself in stimulating company under the headship of Professor H Cullumbine. Dr S R Kottegoda was a natural humorist with an inimitable, unique style of making everybody burst into laughter. Aldous Huxley's *Jesting Pilate* (1926), which is an account of his journey to the East and thence to America, was one source for Kottegoda's humour. That was my introduction to the Aldous Huxley writings. It grew to become, for me, a continuing ramble in them, and to use my interest in music as a thread connecting the material. I am still at work on this musical project.

Aldous Huxley, English writer (1894-1963), wrote 46 books, including *The art of seeing* (1942). *Island: a novel* (1962), was the last but two of his works. Huxley died from a cancer of the tongue. He visited Ceylon in November 1961 on his way back home to California after attending the centenary celebrations of the birth of Tagore in India. The local newspapers gave an account of the visit. He had just completed writing *Island*. The book is a prescription, in story form, for a pragmatic good land (utopia). The location is a small tropical island called Pala, situated in the Indian Ocean some 550 km away from Sri Lanka, between Sri Lanka and Sumatra. Ceylon is mentioned four times in the book. The period is contemporary (c. 1960). For a century, the social arrangements in Pala were designed to help people to live in a fully human way. The Palanese people were bilingual – with Palanese and English. The religion was Tantric Buddhism.

Pala is now destroyed. A pacifist country without an army and without any desire to fight with violence, it was overrun by its militaristic neighbour, Rendang.

Characters in *Island* in connection with health and medicine include two patients (a yacht-wrecked journalist, Will Farnaby, and a woman, Laksmi MacPhail, dying from cancer of the breast); one doctor, Dr Robert MacPhail of mixed Scottish and Palanese descent, a retired physician who does medical work only in emergencies and who

now performs medical research work in the Agricultural Experimental Station; he is the leading philosophical character in the novel; a nurse – Radha Appu; and " 'someone who, I suspect, was definitely practising medicine without a licence' " (as Will Farnaby describes Susila MacPhail), daughter-in-law of Dr Robert MacPhail, and a psychologist, who had administered psychological treatment to relieve him of anxieties.

Health as a need

The general importance of health as a human need is recognised in Pala.

"...the road that leads towards happiness from the inside out, through health, through awareness, through a change in one's attitude towards the world; not towards the mirage of happiness from the outside in, through toys and pills and non-stop distractions." (Mr Chandra Menon, Under-Secretary of Education in Pala).

Healing

Vis medicatrix naturae, the natural healing powers of the body, including the remarkable immunological mechanisms, are actively and continuously taken into consideration in Pala.

In Pala there are hospitals including a Central Hospital in the capital, Shivapuram. Drugs are used, both modern and traditional, but in combination with methods of increasing the body's resistance to illness.

The castaway Farnaby has developed fever.

"I've started him on antibiotics (says Dr Robert MacPhail to Susila MacPhail). Now it's up to you to raise his resistance and give the *vis medicatrix naturae* a chance."

"The little nurse gave him his injection of antibiotic, then, from one of the bottles in her bag, stirred a tablespoonful of some greenish liquid into half a glass of water. It was an extract from a mountain plant related to valerian. 'It helps people to stop worrying without making them sleepy. We give it to convalescents.' "

Prevention on all fronts

Pala takes the principle "Prevention is better than cure" very seriously.

"Our doctors get paid for keeping people well" (Nurse Appu to Will Farnaby).

"Public health and social reform are the indispensable preconditions of any kind of general enlightenment." (Susila MacPhail)

The food in Pala is "Buddhist food, all except the fish, but we've decided that fishes are vegetable within the meaning of the act."

"How do you keep your people well?", asks Farnaby, and Nurse Appu replies:

"We've been asking that question for a hundred years, and we've found a lot of answers. Chemical answers, psychological answers, answers in terms of what you eat, how you make love, what you see and hear, how you feel about being who you are in this kind of world... There's no single cure for what can never have a single cause. So whether it's prevention or whether it's cure, we attack on all the fronts at once. All the fronts – from diet to auto-suggestion, from negative ions to meditation."

Many physical symptoms can be treated psychologically. In Lakshmi's case:

"Luckily the pain doesn't seem to get any worse. We can still handle it psychologically. And today we worked on the nausea. She was able to drink something. I don't think there'll be any more need for intravenous fluids." (Susila MacPhail)

A group of American doctors had recently visited Pala.

"They wanted to find out why we have such low rate of neurosis and cardiovascular trouble... Your neurosis rate is about one if five or even four. Ours is about one in twenty. The one that breaks down gets treatment, on all fronts, and the nineteen who don't break down have had prevention on all the fronts." (Nurse Appu)

The prevalence of psychoses, however, is much the same in Pala as in the rest of the world.

"Psychotics are born vulnerable. Little troubles that other people hardly notice can bring them down. We're just beginning to find out what it is that makes them so vulnerable. We're beginning to be able to spot them in advance of a breakdown. And once they've been spotted, we can do something to raise their resistance. Prevention again – and , of course, on all fronts at once." (Nurse Appu)

V Basnayake, *Emeritus Professor of Physiology, University of Peradeniya.*

Smartest dude in the world

Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, the Dalai Lama and a hippie backpacker are in an aircraft that is spinning out of control. There are only three parachutes. Mr. Clinton says, " I'm the leader of the free world, so I'd better take one of the 'chutes". He does. Mr Gates says, "I'm the smartest man in the world, so I'd better take one of the parachutes, too". He takes it and jumps out. The Dalai Lama says to the hippie, "I'm an old man; you have your life ahead of you. Go ahead: you take the last parachute". Says the hippie: "Chill, man. The smartest dude in the world just jumped out of a plane with my backpack".

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