



SOCIETYNOW

**WELLNESS  
CULTURE**

How the Wellness Movement  
has been used to Empower,  
Profit and Misinform

**Stephanie Alice Baker**

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How the Wellness Movement  
has Been Used to Empower,  
Profit and Misinform

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For Viola, Juliette and Clara.*

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# PREFACE

It has been over six decades since Halbert L. Dunn wrote the book *High-Level Wellness*, which inspired the wellness movement in the United States in the 1970s. While many of the philosophies and practices associated with wellness culture today have a much longer history, it was in the mid-twentieth century that the idea of wellness as a concept and a lifestyle began to assume cultural significance in America before transferring to other parts of the world. Wellness culture coalesced around several core principles that were seized upon by marketers in the late twentieth century to advertise wellness as a consumer product. Today, the wellness industry is comprised of a series of products and services that bear little resemblance to the vision endorsed by the pioneers of the wellness movement in the 1970s. The top internet search results for wellness in early 2022 include a wellness journal, a wellness hamper and wellness dog food!

At the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, wellness transmuted again. In 2020 and throughout much of 2021, wellness became a gateway to misinformation. An aspirational term once associated with health and vitality came to signify deception, conspiracy and political extremism. For some, wellness has always been conflated with misinformation; alternative medicine perceived to be a synonym for pseudo-science and quackery. The modern lifestyle brand, Goop, for

example, is routinely criticised for peddling pseudoscience, selling a range of controversial products under the rubric of wellness including Jade (Yoni) Eggs ‘to harness the power of energy work’ and Psychic Vampire Repellent, an essential oil designed to ‘spray around the aura to protect from psychic attack and emotional harm’. Goop’s celebrity founder, the Hollywood actress turned wellness guru, Gwyneth Paltrow, reveals the impact of celebrity culture on ideas about health, wellness, beauty and happiness. Many of the questionable healing modalities associated with wellness culture today were popularised in the 1800s: mesmerism (hypnosis), homeopathy, hydrotherapy, magnet therapy and chiropractic. While these alternative medical treatments emerged in response to people’s disillusionment with medicine at the time, the treatment paradigm within which they operated is fundamentally different to the vision of wellness proposed by the pioneers of the wellness movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This book seeks to disentangle these vast, and often contradictory, conceptions of wellness by tracing the historical emergence of wellness from a fringe countercultural pursuit to a mainstream cultural phenomenon and consumer product.

While many of the practices associated with wellness culture today have their origins in the Global South, the conception of wellness as a lifestyle and a commodity is inexorably bound to the Global North, in particular the United States. As a result, much of the analysis of wellness culture in this book will focus on the United States, demonstrating how particular social, economic, political and technological conditions in North America have contributed to the cultural preoccupation with wellness today. The proliferation of digital devices and social media have transformed the ways in which knowledge about wellness is produced, disseminated and consumed, rendering wellness more accessible to internet users and giving rise to a series of self-appointed wellness

gurus, who use these technologies for social, economic and political gain. At the same time as extending the global reach of wellness culture, digital technologies introduce new hierarchies and inequalities structured around commercial and corporate interests. The relatively unregulated nature of the internet also makes wellness information online, and the global audiences who consume it, more susceptible to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy. Today, the wellness market is a global industry that combines eastern mysticism and modern psychological ideas about the self with digitisation to shape physical bodies across time and space. However, despite drawing on traditional eastern medicine and philosophy, the growth of the wellness industry in late capitalism is an American phenomenon. Hence, the focus of this book is on America, exploring the foundations of the wellness movement in post-war America to the present day, while acknowledging that the movement draws on historical events, philosophies and ideas from various cultural contexts and has transnational significance as a global industry.

Wellness practices have been subject to cultural appropriation, often bearing little resemblance to their traditional cultural origins. Take yoga, for example. Given the popularity of yoga in America, and around much of the western world, one might assume that the practice is central to Indian culture. As a postdoctoral researcher residing in India in 2009–2010, I was struck by the relative absence of yoga studios in Mumbai at the time. When I eventually found an ashram offering yoga, the practice bore little similarity to the physical asanas (postures) that have come to define the practice of yoga in the West. This was in stark contrast to Dharamsala, a Himalayan region in the north of India, which catered to many westerners in pursuit of wellness and eastern spirituality, and where I completed my yoga teacher training in 2010. This personal experience illuminated that while the global wellness industry

draws on ancient philosophies and practices, these have been appropriated and repackaged as products and services in western contexts to meet a specific consumer demand. The same critiques have been made towards the incorporation of Buddhist practices in the workplace, which tend to frame mindfulness and meditation instrumentally as productivity tools designed to optimise work performance, using scientific language and statistics to prove their efficacy and give these ‘philosophies’ legitimacy among secular audiences, but in the process stripping these religious practices of much of their cultural and ethical significance. These observations highlight the need to refrain from presenting wellness culture as a direct continuation of ancient traditions. The ways in which traditional Buddhist and Hindu practices, such as yoga, mindfulness and meditation, are used as contemporary wellness tools and therapeutic interventions to help individuals actualise their potential speaks more of the cultures in which they have been appropriated than the context in which they originated. This is especially the case with New Age spirituality, which is characterised by an eclectic mix of eastern and western beliefs and practices.

A brief note on tone. I approach the topic of wellness as both a practitioner and as a scholar. I have tried to avoid providing either an apology for wellness or presenting a one dimensional critique of all that is wrong with the term. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many of the problems associated with wellness culture today, including its individualist ethos and the proliferation of wellness practitioners who exploit technological affordances and consumer anxieties for commercial gain. The plethora of wellness influencers advertising questionable products on social media renders wellness culture an easy target to mock and deride. There is a rich body of literature on wellness that focuses on debunking pseudoscience and misinformation. In analysing wellness as a cultural

phenomenon, the focus of this book is on the meanings, discourses and practices ascribed to wellness in western societies, and how these have emerged and evolved over time. Many scholars have critiqued wellness culture's emphasis on personal responsibility for obscuring the social determinants of health. Critiques of this kind have been paramount during the pandemic given the collective response required to limit the spread of the virus. Rather than provide another critique of wellness as a neoliberal pursuit, I approach the topic of wellness culture comprehensively, examining how wellness can operate as both a form of inclusion and oppression. Wellness culture can be moralistic, exclusionary and even harmful, but it can also be enriching and empowering, as its countercultural roots reveal. This book is an attempt to explore these contradictions. Wellness has become a trillion-dollar industry and the concept appears here to stay. While critics are understandably sceptical about some of the products and practices associated with wellness, I hope this book provides a more nuanced understanding of the history of wellness and the reasons for its enduring cultural appeal.

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## WHAT IS WELLNESS CULTURE?

‘Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food’. We have become accustomed to seeing quotes proselytising the health benefits of certain foods, diets and lifestyles on social media. Inspirational quotes of this kind have become the signature of wellness gurus in the twenty-first century (often accompanied by an image of a healthy meal or what is presumed to be a healthy body). The aforementioned quote has a much longer history, attributed to Hippocrates, a Greek physician believed to have lived in the fifth century BCE. Hippocrates is often referred to as the ‘father of medicine’. He has an enduring cultural impact on physicians, many of whom would have repeated the Hippocratic Oath, or a version of it, pledging to ‘do no harm’ and vowing to uphold ethical standards as medical practitioners upon graduating with their medical degrees. In addition to the ethical code attributed to him by the medical profession, Hippocrates has become the ‘favoured father’ of alternative healers. Homoeopaths, herbalists, naturopaths, chiropractors and osteopaths invoke him as the founder of the ideals that underlie their therapeutic approaches to healing and disease.<sup>1</sup> Part of the reason for Hippocrates’

broad cultural resonance with a vast spectrum of physicians and healers is that we know very little about him. What we know of Hippocrates is mostly derived from the writings of the classical Greek philosopher Plato, who describes him as an *Asclepiad* (a healer) from Kos, a Greek island off the coast of modern-day Turkey. Plato's writings date Hippocrates around 430 BCE.<sup>2</sup> The numerous medical treatises referred to as 'the Hippocratic Corpus' were composed in various Greek dialects over many centuries casting doubt that they originated from a single individual.<sup>3</sup> Rather than diminish his influence, this obscurity contributes to Hippocrates' enduring cultural appeal as practitioners are able to attribute a vast array of beliefs, values and practices to him, and Hippocrates' historic status in turn gives his disciples authority and legitimacy. As the historian of science and medicine, William Bynum explains in his book *The History of Medicine*, Hippocrates is 'sufficiently shadowy' to allow a multiplicity of interpretations to be associated with him, yet he is also a real historical figure.

## THE ANCIENT ORIGINS OF WELLNESS

There are several components of Hippocratic medicine that resonate with wellness culture today. First, Hippocratic medicine is holistic. The Hippocratic approach to health is to the whole person rather than treating an isolated symptom of disease. Hippocrates emphasised the importance of diet, lifestyle and the environment in the context of health and disease. This holistic approach to health was rooted in values widespread in Greek society and bears similarities with traditional Indian and Chinese medicine. Greek prohibitions around dissecting human bodies meant that what physicians knew

about illness and disease was mostly learned from their masters, observation and direct engagement with their patients. This patient-centred approach has become the prototype of modern primary care and the holism recurrent in Hippocrates' treatises attracts modern complementary healers to his works.<sup>4</sup> The second reason Hippocrates is so appealing to contemporary wellness practitioners is the underlying naturalism extolled in his works. The Hippocratic Corpus contains a treatise *On the Sacred Disease* that associates disease (seizures symptomatic of epilepsy) with natural causes (an overabundance of phlegm in the body), which has been interpreted as questioning the popular view at the time that disease was the result of divine intervention.<sup>5</sup> Hippocrates was an advocate of the humoral approach to medicine, which proposed that there were four humors (bodily fluids) constitutive of health and disease. According to this paradigm, good health was predicated on the balance of the four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Conversely, it was believed that sickness arose from an imbalance within the human organism caused by the predominance of one or more humors. Humoral therapy associated each of the humors with one of the four elements (earth, air, fire, water), believing that the humors found expression in the temperaments and complexions of the individual, providing a guide to personality and susceptibility to disease. The task of humoral therapy was to diagnose and restore the balance of these humors when disturbed.

Humoral therapy, as espoused by Hippocrates in the fifth century BCE and the Greek physician Galen in the second century AD, also emphasised the importance of balance and moderation. In this regard, the humoral approach to medicine has strong parallels with traditional Chinese and Indian medicine. Ayurveda, a traditional 'life science' and Indian system of medicine originating around 3000–1500 BCE,

considers human health to be contingent on the harmonious state of three energetic forces (vata, pitta, kapha) referred to as *doshas*.<sup>6</sup> The doshas resemble humors in that they are comprised of the natural elements (earth, ether, fire, water, air) and believed to be constitutive of human health and disease. Ayurveda proposes that each individual is composed of all three doshas in a unique combination meaning that one or two of these energies tend to predominate. The aim is not to have all three doshas equally dominant, but rather to balance these energies according to the individual's unique constitution. As a holistic system of medicine, Ayurveda proposes that imbalance (excess or deficiency) can be managed through approaches to diet, exercise and lifestyle in conjunction with attending to an individual's broader environment (e.g. the seasons). Yoga and meditation are part of this tradition.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which originated around 3000–2000 BCE, is also predicated on the concept of holism, viewing the body as an integrated entity that interrelates with celestial and natural elements (water, earth, metal, wood, fire).<sup>7</sup> TCM incorporates the theory of *yin* and *yang* (two opposing, mutable, interdependent forces) to the study of physiology and pathology and to the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of disease. The four bodily humors (qi, blood, moisture, essence) play an important role in balancing *yin* and *yang* in the human body and the harmony of these energies are considered essential for human health.<sup>8</sup> Analogous to Ayurveda and humoral therapy, TCM emphasises the importance of equilibrium, proposing that when the two energies fall out of harmony disease ensues. Herbal remedies and practices, such as acupuncture, qi gong and tai chi, are used by practitioners to correct the imbalance of *yin–yang* in the human body and to cultivate harmony. While Ayurveda and TCM continue to inform complementary and alternative medicine, humoral therapy lost popularity in the nineteenth century

when it was replaced by scientific medicine.<sup>9</sup> All three ancient medical approaches, nevertheless, have enduring cultural influence on contemporary ideas about wellness by emphasising the importance of homeostasis, balance and harmony as key indicators of human health and tailoring holistic approaches to treat the whole person rather than treating the isolated symptoms of illness and disease.<sup>10</sup>

### WELLNESS, A MODERN CONCEPT FOR A MODERN WORLD

Wellness is often described as a modern term with ancient origins. Our central understanding of wellness as preventative and holistic can be traced back to traditional Greek, Chinese and Indian medicine. Many of the practices that comprise contemporary wellness culture approach health from a holistic perspective, emphasising the role of diet, lifestyle, sleep, mental and physical activity in cultivating health and preventing disease. Holistic approaches to health are particularly appealing to contemporary practitioners given the Cartesian dualism (mind-body split) that characterised philosophy in the seventeenth century, including the increasing tendency for scientists and medical practitioners to obscure the patient by reducing medicine to ever smaller units of analysis: cells, molecules, atoms. Much wellness discourse also presents health as a state of balance and harmony, sharing the naturalism of these ancient approaches while framing wellness in psychological and spiritual vernaculars more palatable to secular audiences. Despite these similarities, it would be a mistake to see contemporary wellness culture as a direct continuation of these traditional philosophies and practices. The cultural contexts in which these ancient medical systems

were established were remarkably different from the contemporary contexts in which wellness is practiced today. Instead, contemporary wellness practitioners tend to adopt a selective approach to traditional medicine, selecting specific concepts and practices from these traditions but appropriating and applying them to a radically different context and consumer demand.

Take the ancient Greeks, for example. Hippocratic medicine resonates with wellness culture in so far as it promotes naturalism and holism, viewing health and illness comprehensively as a product of lifestyle and nutrition. Many of the beliefs attributed to Hippocrates, however, are reimagined from one or two excerpts.<sup>11</sup> Rather than reject divine causes in their entirety, the Hippocratic Corpus combines theology and healing conceiving of health, illness and disease within a religious and moral framework. Moreover, the ancient Greek term *eudaimonia* (commonly translated as ‘happiness’ or ‘well-being’, although ‘human flourishing’ is a more apt definition), espoused by Greek philosophers, had a very different meaning for the Greeks. In Greek philosophy, the pursuit of *eudaimonia* had moral undertones that extended beyond the individual. *Eudaimonia* was associated with living a ‘good life’, involving a clear conception of right and wrong moral action, as a member of the *polis* (city-state). The goal was not simply to *feel good*, but to *be good* by exercising moral virtue. Ethics and character were inexorably connected as exemplified by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose book *Ta Ethika* is literally translated as ‘On Character’. Pleasure, in this regard, was simply a by-product of right moral action rather than a pursuit in itself, rendering well-being remarkably different from the contemporary pursuit of happiness and wellness as ultimate objectives. Moreover, unlike the self-help manuals that flourish today, classical Greek and Stoic philosophical manuals were not about living “your best life”, but

being a good citizen. These practices were also limited to a specific part of the Greek body-politic in contrast to the burgeoning wellness industry that markets self-improvement as a broad consumer demand.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, while these ancient modalities have informed contemporary ideas about wellness, they are fundamentally distinct from the notion of wellness as a cultural imperative.

Contemporary understandings of wellness have emerged in a distinct cultural context. Humoral therapy, Ayurveda and TCM provide explanatory frameworks to understand health and illness, but these models emphasise the role of the cosmos in generating disease indicative of broader cultural views at the time about the limits of human agency and individual free will. Whereas most traditional healing systems situated illness and disease in relation to the cosmos, modern medicine explains sickness principally in terms of the body: ‘everything that needed to be known could essentially be discovered by probing more deeply and ever more minutely into the flesh, its systems, cells, its DNA’, as the medical historian Roy Porter explains.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to traditional societies which emphasised the importance of the collective, western cultures tend to be pre-occupied with the self, the individual and their personal identity, and ‘this quest has come to be equated with (or reduced to) the individual body and the embodied personality’.<sup>14</sup> Explanations of how and why wellness culture has emerged need to consider the philosophical, religious and political contexts in which individualism has emerged, as well as the economic materialism and consumer culture of late capitalism, and the development of medicine: ‘its promise, project and products’, as Porter’s work on the history of medicine elucidates.

Wellness culture also flourishes in what Chris Rojek and I term ‘low trust societies’ characterised by the turn to healers, lifestyle and wellness gurus as a result of declining institutional trust.<sup>15</sup> While trust relations among medical practitioners and

the public fluctuates, there has been growing disillusionment with scientific medicine in the late twentieth century, as the sociologist Deborah Lupton observes, extending to the objectivity and political neutrality of medical knowledge itself.<sup>16</sup> Public distrust of medical and scientific institutions is symptomatic of this broader climate of 'low trust', which similarly impacts politics and the media. 'These are strange times', as Roy Porter professed, 'when we are healthier than ever but more anxious about our health'. Medical advances in knowledge and practice about human health and disease have increased life expectancy and reduced premature death. Yet, despite these marvels, few people today feel confident about their personal health, healthcare delivery and the medical profession in general. Distrust of the powerful elite thought to comprise the medical establishment provides the capacity for alternative figures to achieve influence in the context of health and disease. These anxieties are not new, but they have been amplified and strategically promoted by savvy influencers on social media across vast social networks for social, political and commercial gain.

#### WELLNESS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO MAINSTREAM MEDICINE

Many of our contemporary ideas about wellness originated from therapies popularised in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. The European spa towns (situated on mineral spas), which reached their heyday between 1700 and 1930 in towns and cities across Europe, share much in common with the spa industry today. Spa towns purported that natural mineral waters had health benefits and curative properties to treat pain and disease. They were popular among the aristocracy and middle classes in the days before modern medicine as a therapeutic enterprise, and as a leisure pursuit and antidote