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### **Ways to Go Beyond, and Why They Work: Science and Spiritual Practices**

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#### **Abstract**

Spiritual practices are being investigated scientifically as never before, and many of them have been shown to have measurable effects on physiology, brain activity, well-being and health. The effects are generally beneficial. There is a wide range of spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer, rituals, pilgrimage, and even practices that are not normally thought of as spiritual, like sports, can have a spiritual dimension. Trinitarian models of ultimate consciousness or spiritual reality make it easier to understand how such different activities can all have spiritual effects.

#### **Introduction: preliminary notes**

I met Sir Alister Hardy only once, in Oxford, in the early 1980s, soon after my first book *A New Science of Life*, was published. He was friendly and open minded. We had several overlapping areas of interest, including his suggestion that evolution could involve telepathy-like connections between animals – as in the spread of the opening of milk bottle by blue tits – which I thought of in terms of morphic resonance, the hypothesis advanced in my book.

I was inspired by his work in the RERU, and like the idea of building up a natural history of mystical experience. Subsequently I have myself collected more than 12,000 accounts of unexplained human and animal abilities, classified in a computer database into more than 100 categories.

Religious experience is very much the theme of my Sir Alister Hardy memorial lecture in 2019. Spiritual practices are important because they lead to experiences. Many of the cases studied by Sir Alister were spontaneous, but we now know much more about a wide range of practices than when Sir Alister set up the RERU fifty years ago.

Never before has any civilisation had access to almost all the world's spiritual practices. In major cosmopolitan cities, it is now possible to attend rituals from a wide range of religious traditions, to learn to meditate, to practise yoga or chi gong, to take part in shamanic practices, to explore consciousness through psychedelic drugs

(albeit illegally in most places), to sing and chant, to participate in a wide range of prayers, to learn martial arts and to practise a bewildering array of sports.

All these practices can take us beyond normal, familiar, everyday states of consciousness. They can lead to experiences of connection with more-than-human consciousness, and a sense of a greater conscious presence. Such experiences are often described as spiritual.

The experiences themselves leave open the question of the nature of the spiritual realm. As I discuss in my recent book, *Ways to Go Beyond, And Why They Work*,<sup>1</sup> there are several possible interpretations of spiritual experiences, including the materialist view that they are all inside brains and that there are no more-than-human forms of consciousness 'out there'.

At the same time, spiritual practices are being investigated scientifically as never before. We are at the beginning of a new phase of scientific, philosophical and spiritual development.

This convergence of science and spiritual practices is surprising from the point of view of materialist orthodoxy, in which the vast majority of contemporary scientists have been trained. Yet it is entirely consistent with the scientific method, which involves the formation of hypotheses – guesses about the way the world works – and then testing them experimentally. The ultimate arbiter is experience, not theory. In French, the word *expérience*, means both 'experience' and 'experiment'. The Greek word for experience is *empeiria*, the root of our English word 'empirical'. The exploration of consciousness through consciousness itself is literally empirical, based on experience. Spiritual practices provide ways in which consciousness can be explored empirically.<sup>2</sup>

There are many kinds of spiritual practice, and in my new book I discuss seven: the spiritual side of sports, learning from animals, fasting, spiritual openings through cannabis and psychedelics, prayer, holy days and festivals, and being kind. In my previous book, *Science and Spiritual Practices*,<sup>3</sup> I discuss another seven. All these practices have measurable effects. In various ways they affect our physiology, breathing, heart rates, autonomic nervous systems, hormone levels, brain activities, mental abilities, feelings, emotions, visual imagery, sense of beauty, feelings of wellbeing, happiness, and compassion.

But how can such very different activities – like meditation and sports, fasting and chanting, taking psychedelics and participating in rituals – all have spiritual as well as physiological effects? Why do they work?

<sup>1</sup> Sheldrake, R. (2019) *Ways To Go Beyond, And Why They Work*. Coronet, London.

<sup>2</sup> The pioneer of this field of enquiry was William James in his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which were the Gifford Lectures in 1901–2 (James, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Sheldrake, R. (2017) *Science and Spiritual Practices*. Coronet, London.

In our contemporary secular context, many people take up spiritual practices for their health benefits, or to become happier and more successful. But traditionally, in their original religious contexts, the beneficial effects of such practices were not the primary reason for doing them, but by-products of an underlying desire to come into conscious relationship with more-than-human forms of consciousness.

Through spiritual practices, many people feel a connection to a greater consciousness, or presence, or being. They often experience this connection as blissful or joyful. Even one brief experience of a state of blissful connection can be enough to change the course of someone's life. And such life-changing experiences can come spontaneously without any spiritual practices at all, as in near-death experiences and spontaneous mystical experiences.<sup>4</sup>

But do these experiences of connection really relate to forms of consciousness 'out there'? Do spirits, gods, and goddesses actually exist? Is there a conscious ground of being that underlies the universe, or an ultimate state of bliss that Buddhists call nirvana?

Or are all these experiences inside our bodies, and especially inside our brains? Is the experience of connecting with a consciousness greater than our own an illusion? Is it no more than an altered state of our own mind that is generated by unusual patterns of neuronal activity? As I discussed in the introduction to this book, most atheists and materialists answer 'yes' to these questions.

The usual materialist worldview is that we live in an unconscious universe. The only forms of consciousness are those that have emerged in complex brains, and above all in human brains. Other animals may be conscious to lesser degrees, dogs probably more than frogs; lower animals, like worms, have less mental activity, if they have any at all. Perhaps on other planets, in other solar systems, there are biological beings with brains analogous to ours – in other words, aliens or extraterrestrials. But there are no immaterial gods or spirits 'out there'. Spiritual practices work through their physiological, chemical and physical effects on bodies and brains, not by contacting mysterious spiritual beings outside the physical world.

By contrast, all religions agree that the ultimate reality is conscious, with a far greater consciousness than ours, unimaginably beyond our limited human conceptions. And yet this ultimate reality is related to the world in which we live, and to our own minds and societies. What is the connection between ultimate consciousness and nature?

## **The threefold nature of ultimate consciousness**

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<sup>4</sup> Hay, D. *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2006.

The ultimate reality is indescribable, without qualities – nirvana, the Godhead, Nirguna Brahman. But the interface between this ultimate reality and the natural world is widely thought of as threefold or trinitarian.

The threefold nature of God is reflected in nature itself, and in human life and minds. Our minds reflect the divine mind. To use a modern mathematical metaphor, they are fractals of the ultimate mind.

According to the *Kena Upanishad*, one of the foundational holy books in the Hindu tradition, Brahman, God, is not an object. God is not something that the eyes can see, or the ears can hear, a thing among other things. Instead, Brahman is that by which the mind comprehends, by which the eye sees, by which the ear hears. Atman, which is at the centre of our own conscious being, is the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear, and the ground of all knowing. Our minds participate in the mind or knowing of Brahman through knowing themselves: 'What cannot be seen with the eye, but that whereby the eye can see: know that alone to be Brahman.'<sup>5</sup>

In the Hindu conception, Saguna Brahman, Brahman with qualities, God as manifested in the world, has three fundamental aspects *sat*, *chit* and *ānanda*, being, consciousness and bliss, *sat-chit-ananda*. As Bede Griffiths put it, 'God, or Ultimate Reality, is experienced as absolute being (*sat*), known in pure consciousness (*cit*), communicating absolute bliss (*ānanda*). This was the experience of the seers of the Upanishads as it has been that of innumerable holy men in India ever since. It is an experience of self-transcendence, which gives an intuitive insight into Reality.'<sup>6</sup>

Different schools of Indian thought have their own versions of this trinity. In Kashmiri Shaivism, the ground of all being is called *Parashiva*; the source of form and order is *Shiva* and the primordial energy of the cosmos is *Shakti*. Shakti is feminine.

Within the Christian tradition, God is the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ground of all being is the Father. The Son is the Word or Logos, the source of form and order; the Spirit is the breath, wind, or energy, like Shakti. In Indian languages, the words for spirit – *ruach* in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and *pneuma* in the Greek of the New Testament – become Shakti. Like Shakti, *ruach* is feminine. All three aspects of the Holy Trinity constitute the unity of God acting in and through the universe, creating and sustaining it.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Word of God is primarily the spoken word, not the written word. Speaking is the fundamental metaphor for the Christian conception of God as Holy Trinity. Spoken words involve on the one hand structures, forms, patterns and meanings, and on the other hand a flow of breath or spirit. Think of your own speech. You are the being on which both your words and your breath depend and from which they come forth.

<sup>5</sup> Mascaro, J. (trans), *The Upanishads*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, Collins, London, 1982, p. 27.

In this metaphor, you are the ground of Being. If there are only words in your mind, unspoken, they remain latent. They are unmanifested Logos. If there is an outflow of breath and no words, there is merely an energetic flow, with no form or meaning, Spirit without form. But when the form and order of your words are carried on your outbreath, your words can communicate and connect. The Logos and Spirit work together.

Although we can distinguish between the speaker (the ground of Being), the words that are spoken (the Logos) and the breath on which they are carried (the Spirit), in speech all three aspects have an underlying unity. They are three in one and one in three.

In some Christian interpretations of the Holy Trinity, like St Augustine's psychological model, God the Father is the knower, God the Son or Logos the known, and the Holy Spirit is the joyful love between them. This conception is very similar to *sat-chit-ananda*.

In both the Hindu and Christian traditions there is an ambiguity about the dynamical principle, namely Shakti or Spirit. On the one hand she is bliss, joy and love, and on the other hand she is the principle of movement or change – creative and destructive power, cosmic energy, breath, wind and life-spirit. What is the relationship between bliss and energy, which are both aspects of Shakti or Spirit?

Divine consciousness is essentially blissful, and this blissful aspect, *ānanda*, is distinguishable from the ground of being, *sat*, and knowledge or consciousness, *chit*. The ultimate conscious being, Brahman or God, is full, not in a state of need or lack or desire. And yet this is not a static bliss or joy beyond all movement and change, but the basis of all movement and change. As Griffiths put it, the *ānanda*, the bliss or joy of the Godhead, is 'the outpouring of the superabundant being and consciousness of the eternal, the Love which unites Father and Son in the non-dual Being of the Spirit.'<sup>7</sup>

In the Muslim tradition, God's oneness likewise includes being, consciousness, and bliss, which are called *wujud*, *wijdan* and *wajd*.

All these traditions share much common ground. As the theologian David Bentley Hart summarises it:

In God, the fullness of being is also a perfect act of infinite consciousness that, wholly possessing the truth of being in itself, forever finds its consummation in boundless delight. The Father knows his own essence perfectly in the mirror of the Logos and rejoices in the Spirit who is the 'bond of love' or 'bond of glory' in which divine being and divine consciousness are perfectly joined. God's *wujud* is also his *wijdan* – his infinite being is infinite consciousness – in the unity of his *wajd*, the bliss of perfect enjoyment. The divine *sat* is always also the divine *chit*, and the perfect coincidence is the divine *ānanda* . . . God is

<sup>7</sup> Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, Collins, London, 1982, p. 190.

the one act of being, consciousness, and bliss in whom everything lives and moves and has its being; and so the only way to know the truth of things is, necessarily, the way of bliss.<sup>8</sup>

Chinese philosophy starts from very different principles, but the Taoist conception of the polarity of yin and yang interacting in all nature is also trinitarian. In the familiar symbol of their relationship, yin, the dark swirl, contains within it a seed of yang, the light swirl, and vice versa. Their polarity is not a dualistic opposition, but rather an interdependence or complementarity. Both yin and yang are part of an ultimate unity, the Tao, which includes them both, symbolised by the circle that contains the interlocking swirls.

### Trinities and spiritual practices

Trinitarian models, explicit in Hinduism and in Christianity, and implicit in the mystical theology of Islam, provide a way of interpreting why very different spiritual practices provide spiritual connections to ultimate reality and are at the same time joyful. Without such models, it would be difficult to see how practices as different as meditation, chanting and sports could all have a spiritual dimension.

Meditation, which typically involves minimal physical activity, seems to be a way of connecting with the ground of being, *sat*, or the Father. The deepest forms of meditation can go further, beyond all differentiation within the divine, to the Godhead, or Nirguna Brahman or nirvana. This ultimate reality is blissful by its very nature. Participating in it gives the deepest possible joy.

Sports, by contrast, are not about stillness, but about movements directed towards a goal. The spiritual experiences that come through sports link more to the principle of flow, to Shakti, or spirit. They connect with the bliss of this flow. Likewise, singing, chanting, dancing and music connect with the flow of the spirit and the joy that accompanies it. Watching the graceful movements of animals also shows us a combination of form and energy coming from a common source.

By contrast again, the contemplation of the beauty of flowers (*SSP*, chapter 4) and other experiences of visual beauty have less to do with flow and more to do with form, or idea, or *chit*, or Logos.

Fasting is not in itself a spiritual experience, but is a practice that interrupts the normal habits of appetite and bodily desire. It creates a space in which spiritual realities can be more present. The decision to fast is taken with the intention of going beyond regular desires and habits. Fasting creates a mental and physical context in which other spiritual practices, like prayer and meditation, can be more effective.

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<sup>8</sup> Hart, D.B., *The Experience of God: Being Consciousness Bliss*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013, pp. 248–249.

Holy days and festivals create spaces in which regular spiritual practices like prayer, chanting, singing and rituals can be the principal focus of activity, as opposed to work. These celebrations bind communities together, relating them to the cycles of the more-than-human world, and to the ultimate source of nature and humanity.

Prayer provides a way of explicitly linking our own minds, needs, fears and intentions to the greater minds of the spiritual beings to whom we pray. Petitionary prayer links us to the flow of events, and offers us the possibility of being co-creators of what happens, rather than passive recipients.

Some psychedelic experiences, especially with substances such as DMT and 5-methoxy DMT, take the experimenter to what seems like the ground of being itself, or *sat*. But most psychedelic experiences create an intense immersion in the realm of imagination with its ever-changing forms and meanings.

Psychedelic visions are combinations of form and energy in the world of the imagination, Logos and Spirit. And there may be many imaginations, not just our own individual imaginations. We may all participate in a collective human imagination, expressed through archetypal forms in our dreams, fantasies and visions, which the psychologist C.G. Jung called the collective unconscious, shaped by collective memories.<sup>9</sup>

Other species may also have imaginations that work through their dreams. We cannot ask animals what they dream about, but when they are sleeping, they show physiological changes, like rapid eye movements, very similar to dreaming humans. According to the *Oxford Companion to Animal Behaviour*, 'On the basis of the evidence, many scientists are willing to agree that many animals experience dreams that are akin to those of human beings.'<sup>10</sup>

For example, dogs dream, and probably dream about things that dogs can do, and perhaps about things they cannot do, like fly. Perhaps the dream worlds of different species sometimes overlap and influence each other. Maybe the entire planet, Gaia, has a dreamlike imagination; maybe the sun has a solar imagination; maybe the galaxy has a galactic imagination; maybe the entire cosmos has a cosmic imagination. And all these imaginations may be derived from and within the divine imagination, which contains all possible forms, ideas, words, meaning, experiences, and scenarios.

In dreams and in psychedelic experiences, we may not be confined to the imaginal realm of human minds, but contact the imaginal realms of other species, of the earth and the heavenly bodies, and ultimately of the divine mind in its joy.

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<sup>9</sup> Sheldrake, R., *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature* (2nd ed.), Icon Books, London, 2011, chapter 14.

<sup>10</sup> McFarland, D. (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Animal Behaviour*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 141.

In so far as all spiritual practices can lead us towards a greater sense of connection with the whole, or the All, or the love of God, then they expand our awareness of our kinship with other people, with other animals, with plants, with the earth, and with all nature. They motivate us to behave more kindly, and to live and work for the greater good.

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