

Extending What We Can Talk About: Spirituality as Grounded in Relationship (An Exploration Through the Ideas of Lowen, Winnicott, Schore, and Patanjali)

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Abstract

Spirit has often been separated from body and mind and treated as not amenable to scientific study. A big influence in this regard was Ludwig Wittgenstein who, in 1922, came to the conclusion that the language of science was not able to talk about the mystical, saying, “There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical” (p. 90). With the development of the science of the human mind and human relationships, spirit is perhaps becoming more amenable again to study. Alexander Lowen (1988) brought the concept of “spirit” under scientific and therapeutic observation through the concept of bio-energy, working with the body as well as the mind. Donald Winnicott (1953, 1960), through the idea of transitional phenomena, placed the language of the mystical in a psychodynamic and scientific context. Alan Schore (2012) has provided a neurophysiological way of talking about how the unconscious process contributes to human development through relationship. Patanjali’s *Yogasutra*, compiled 2,000 years ago, covers similar ground in a way which remains useful and relevant and which helps in understanding the distinction between mind and body and spirit.

Waitara

Tēnā ia anei i te nuinga o te wā wehea ai te wairua mai i te tinana me te hinengaro, ā, meatia ai kāre e whaiwāhi hai kuapapa mātai hinengaro. I te tau 1922, ka puta te whakataunga a Ludwig Wittgenstein kāre e taea e te reo pūtaiao te kōrero mō te tūāhu, arā, ko tāna, ‘Āe ra hoki! Kāre he kupu hai whakaahua. Koianeī tōna tohu atua’ (w.90). Kua whaneke ake nei te taiao o te hinengaro me te whakawhanaungatanga, kua rata haere pea te wā wānanga wairua. Nā Alexander Lowen (1998) i mau te ariā ‘wairua’ ki raro i te tirohanga mātai hinengaro mātai haumanu mā te ariā pūngao koiora, mahiatahitia nei te tinana me te hinengaro. Nā

Sandle, R. (2016). Extending what we can talk about: Spirituality as grounded in relationship (An exploration through the ideas of Lowen, Winnicott, Schore, and Patanjali). *Ata: Journal of Psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand*, 20(1), 47–55. DOI:10.9791/ajpanz.2016.05 © New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists Inc.

Donald Winnicott (1953, 1960), i whakauru te reo ā-wairua ki roto i te horopaki mātauranga pūtaiao, whakahihiko hinengaro. Kua homai e Alan Schore he ara kōrero hanga mātai whaiaroaro mō te hatepenga mauri moe ki te whanaketanga o te tangata puta mai i te whakawhanaungatanga. He rite tonu te papa pōtaea e tā Patanjali *Yogasutra*, i whakaemihia rua mano tau ki muri, ā, e hāngai tonu ana e whai hua tonu ana hoki me te āwhina i te mātauranga whai haere i te rangatiratanga o te hinengaro te tinana me te wairua.

Keywords: spirituality; self; relationship; body; transitional phenomena; neuroscience; *Yogasutra*

This paper will look at the possibility that the spiritual and the relational are closely connected if not the same thing. I would like to acknowledge tangata whenua for the inspiration for this paper, specifically for a learning experience I have written about elsewhere.

As the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists continues to develop a relationship with Tangata Whenua, in the last two years' conferences this has included providing a space for Māori healers to practice their art. Delegates were invited to drop in if they felt called to. I have responded to this call and have been surprised how much at home I felt there. It had many similarities to a Bioenergetic workshop, with mattresses on the floor and physical and energetic work and talk all going on. One of the elders spoke of a central concept in the healing work: that of wairua. Wairua is often translated as spirituality, but the elder broke down the meaning for us. Wai can be understood as a stream, in this case a stream of energy, and rua means two — the two streams. One stream he described as the soul stream, individual presence free from obstruction. The other stream he described as the ego stream, which contains history. The task of the healer, he said, is to stand in the soul stream. When we do this, the ego stream becomes more visible to us and the next task is not to get caught up in it, but to reflect it and to stay in the soul stream. (Sandle, 2013, p. 243)

This made intuitive sense to me regarding the way I think about my work as a psychotherapist. Talking about this in supervision, I realised that most of my training involved understanding the ego stream (as it should), however I found myself becoming interested in the soul stream and what it took to stay standing in the soul stream. What follows is my attempt to define the language of what this means for me.

Relationship and Spirituality

In order to illustrate what I mean by the similarity of the concepts of relationship and spirituality, I would like to describe an early experience of mine while studying psychology at university. My job as demonstrator in the psych lab was to help students learn how to teach rats a simple task. The demonstrator's job mainly involved dealing with situations

where the relationship between the student and their rat had broken down. Typically the student complained that their rat was untrainable and wanted a new one. Their focus on the task was causing them to lose their relationship with the rat and to objectify it as “untrainable”. To help the student re-establish the relationship, it was necessary to encourage them to watch the rat more closely, look for any (usually very slight) changes in its behaviour, and attune their own responses to these. The student was usually surprised that their rat was indeed trainable when they did this.

The definition of relationship that this example illustrates is that relationship involves a process of moment by moment observation and response, a process which can be interrupted by the attention of the observer being withdrawn and focussed on his or her own need (for example, for the rat to reach the set goal).

The links between relationship in this sense and spirit are explored in the *Yogasutra* of Patanjali, a 2,000-year-old document of uncertain origin. In Europe and the US academics and therapists are beginning to take this text seriously. David Gordon White recently completed a “biography” of it based on what is available in the written record (White, 2014) and psychoanalyst Hellfried Krusche has explored it in depth with his yoga teacher T. K. V. Desikachar, finding links to current psychoanalytic thinking (Desikachar & Krusche, 2007). It is written in tight aphorisms which unfold their meaning when contemplated. The area covered by the *Yogasutra* is that referred to by Wittgenstein (1922) with his famous conclusion, “With regard to the things we cannot talk about we should remain silent” (p. 90). My understanding of the difficulty in talking about the area of spirituality is that processes such as relationship can easily become reified or concretised. The very naming of a process runs the risk of reifying it, and to lessen the possibility of this happening symbols and metaphors can be used, and are used from time to time by Patanjali. He does use a word that could be translated as “spirit” (*purusha*) but generally avoids it, preferring a word that refers to the process of seeing (*drashtar*). The *Yogasutra* is, on the one hand, open to interpretation and, on the other, able to be adapted to the world in which it is read. A recent translation by Frans Moors (2012), for example, is based on his insights gained in relationship with his teacher who again was T. K. V. Desikachar. The *Yogasutra* placed the process of perception with the self/observer (*drashtar*) or spirit (*purusha*) and not the ego which is described as part of the phenomenological world (*prakriti*). Unlike this world, which is constantly changing, spirit is constant. Distortions in perception come from identification with the ego as distinct from the spirit. My thinking is that spirit is a relational process and that perception and consciousness lie in this process, contained as it is within the phenomena of the world. Ego states are among these phenomena and they develop and are modified through relationship.

Relationship, Spirituality and the Body: Al Lowen and Bioenergetics

Alexander Lowen (1976, 1988, 2004) has explored the nature of spirit in a way which avoids mysticism and allows it to be talked about scientifically. Lowen (2004) placed much emphasis on grounding which he described as an individual being “connected to the earth and the natural environment, to their body and its feelings, and to their loved ones and fellow

creatures” (p. 136). In this way he described the individual as essentially relational. Lowen (1988) took an energetic perspective on spirit “which will enable us to comprehend the true nature of bodily grace and spirituality without becoming mystical” (p. 3), defining it (Lowen, 1976) as “the life force within an organism manifested as the self-expression of the individual” (p. 65). We might know intuitively what he means, but for this to be scientifically explored it needs to be quantified. Can it be quantified? Bioenergetics focuses on identifying structural blocks to the life force, or bioenergy, and releasing them, freeing the self-expression of the individual. It is the block that is quantified rather than the life force. In this process the relationship between the therapist and patient is paramount. This is also the approach taken by Patanjali. *Yogasutra IV-3* states (my translation) “Like a farmer piercing a dyke to irrigate a field, it is the removing of obstacles which leads to free expression of potential.” Like the therapist with their patient, the farmer is in relationship with the land, and both the farmer and the therapist are involved in helping the life force flow by helping in the removal of blocks. Bioenergetics sees these blocks not only in mental ego structures but also in the body itself, where they are identifiable as overly tense or slack muscular holding and the impact of this on other bodily processes. These blocks develop in relationship, paradoxically at moments when relationship fails.

Lowen (1988) wrote of the situation where the child is overly restrained by its parents in such a way that it is no longer able to “follow its bliss”: “Whether the child submits or rebels, the loving connection between parent and child is broken. With the loss of love, the spirituality of the child is damaged, and he falls from grace” (p. 14). Lowen took things one step further from quantifying a block, in this case the excessive restraint applied by the parent and its impact on the behaviour and body of the child, to naming the importance of relationship in sustaining spirituality. Perhaps at this point I can further clarify what I mean by relationship. The excessive restraint by the parent above falls outside my meaning as it is based on the parent’s need and treats the child as part of the parent. Just as with the student and the rat, such a parent needs help to re-establish relationship with their child by observing the child and responding to it appropriately in order for mutual goals to be achieved. Restraint in itself can be relational; there are times when the dyke needs to be in place.

With grounding as his focus, Lowen (1988) was quite literal in his use of the concept of bio-energy, referring to actual biochemical processes within the body that sustain life. He derived simple practical insights from this approach, for example, that a tense contracted muscle is in an energetically discharged state and recovers by relaxing which increases its charge again. Thus a highly charged person does not easily become over-excited because his or her body, by virtue of its relaxed musculature, has the capacity to hold or contain the high charge. Such a person has a greater ability to connect to the world and greater awareness of that connectedness. This relaxed state of high charge, which helps with grounding, develops and is sustained in relationship, just as the state of being grounded helps with relationship. The therapist, like the farmer in the *Yogasutra IV-3*, by understanding and relating to the client as the farmer relates to his/her land, is therefore able to help the client identify and release blocks such as the embodied memory of an overly restraining parent. Free from such blocks, the client is better able to perceive the world clearly and relate to it in a graceful manner — to free his or her spirit. Lowen stayed clear of the mystical by providing a language

for describing the spirit in an energetic and relational way. Donald Winnicott (1960) developed this language into the realm of the mystical without abandoning a scientific approach.

A Language for Relationship and the Mystical: Donald Winnicott and Transitional Phenomena

Lowen (1988) spoke of what is needed of an individual in order to connect to themselves, their loved ones, and to the environment, but Winnicott took this further, finding language to describe this process of connection. This language enables us to work with the dilemma regarding the risk of concretising a process when we name it. With his famous statement, “There is no such thing as an infant”, Winnicott (1960) drew scientific attention to what had been to a large extent ignored in scientific psychology; that is relationship per se. It is interesting that he did this by the use of negative language, which has often been used to deny the existence of spirit. For example Manning (2015, p. 164) said:

When therapists talk of “spirit” in a manner which suggests Cartesian dualism — as in a phrase like “mind, body and spirit” — implying that these are somehow different substances, or exist on a different plane from each other, an untestable and limiting belief is being suggested. The scientific question, the null hypothesis, will be *what if it isn't true, what if there is only what we can see, the body, and what if the experience of mind and spirit are illusions created by the brain?*

In effect he is saying there is no such thing as spirit.

The use of negative language by Winnicott (1960) draws attention to our predisposition to conflate structure and process. We might think, “Of course there is such a thing as an infant!” and perhaps be confronted by our tendency to imagine an infant existing on its own, when in fact it is dependent on its mother and the relationship with her for survival. This dependency might seem obvious but there have been times when premature babies were isolated in incubators and the importance of the bonding process underestimated.

As well as using negative language, Winnicott also found a positive way of talking about relationship by focussing on the process of developmental separation of the child from its mother. He called this a transitional process and pointed out that it is populated by transitional phenomena which include, for example, dreams and transference.

This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. (Winnicott, 1953, p. 97)

This area can be difficult to talk about, particularly when the transitional phenomenon is an abstract or mystical one. Just as a child might cling to a transitional object such as a blanket, so can a creative scientist cling to his or her idea or a religious practitioner cling to his/her

belief. This can give rise to intense feelings and conflict and the demonisation of the other who might be attempting to challenge the importance or reality of the transitional object. Describing the relationship between infant and mother within which transitional phenomena occur, Winnicott (1960) said:

One half of the theory of the parent-infant relationship concerns the infant, and is the theory of the infant's journey from absolute dependence, through relative dependence, to independence, and, in parallel, the infant's journey from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, and from autoerotism to object relationships. The other half of the theory of the parent-infant relationship concerns maternal care, that is to say the qualities and changes in the mother that meet the specific and developing needs of the infant towards whom she orientates. (p. 589)

By observing and describing the nature of the relationship between mother and infant in this way, he was able to provide a language that can be used to describe "mystical" phenomena in adults. In adulthood, as in infancy, this territory is a relational one requiring mutual attunement of an ongoing and changing nature. Describing this process in infancy Winnicott (1960) said:

We see therefore that in infancy and in the management of infants there is a very subtle distinction between the mother's understanding of her infant's need based on empathy, and her change over to an understanding based on something in the infant or small child that indicates need. This is particularly difficult for mothers because of the fact that children vacillate between one state and the other; one minute they are merged with their mothers and require empathy, while the next they are separate from her, and then if she knows their needs in advance she is dangerous, a witch. (p. 593-594)

In this way Winnicott (1960) placed the language of the mystical (a dangerous witch) in the realm of the developmental relationship; a transitional phenomenon. This can be seen as the template for an adult witch hunt, which can occur when stressed boundaries evoke transitional phenomena and re-awaken infant-like experience.

The ability to manage the early relationship (for both the mother and the infant) depends on what Winnicott (1960) called "the isolation of the central self".

Another phenomenon that needs consideration at this phase is the hiding of the core of the personality. Let us examine the concept of a central or true self. The central self could be said to be the inherited potential which is experiencing a continuity of being, and acquiring in its own way and at its own speed a personal psychic reality and a personal body scheme. It seems necessary to allow for the concept of the isolation of this central self as a characteristic of health. (p. 591)

Winnicott's (1960) central or true self, the experience of "going on being", leads to and is sustained by this liberating isolation, both in the child and in the mother. This liberation is

not liberation from relationship but liberation into relationship. The true self can be understood as an alternative way of naming the spirit. Winnicott's use of the term "isolation" is relevant here in that it refers to something more than the process of separation of the infant from the mother as it develops. It refers to an important distinction between the spirit (a relational phenomenon) and the ego (a structural one). What is also being referred to here is the relationship between structure and function. These are different aspects of the same thing and it could be said that the science of human development is moving from an emphasis on structure to a more balanced one in which the non-concrete concept of function is being given equal attention. Neuroscientist and psychoanalyst Alan Schore (for example, see Schore, 2012) is among the leaders in this field, describing how the nature of the infant's relationship with the mother determines the physiological structure of its developing brain.

Alan Schore and the Relational Nature of the Development and Maintenance of Affect Regulation

Alan Schore spoke about Winnicott's concept of the isolation of the true self in a conversation with David Bullard:

Winnicott talked about the child in the second year achieving a complex developmental advance — the adaptive ability to be alone, and the creation of true autonomy. That is, to be separate, to be processing one's own individuality and one's own self system in the presence of another. The other is a background presence, so it doesn't get swept into the child. But they're literally both individuating in their presence together. And this is a kind of silent being together without having a need to take care of the other or support the other, of literally that kind of comfort. (Bullard, 2015)

This state could be understood as Winnicott's (1960) state of "going on being" which I have suggested is the same as the spirit. Schore (2012) has researched the relational development of neurophysiology which leads to this state. This is the development of what he calls affect regulation. When reading what Schore (2012) means by affect regulation, we can see that he is referring to more than the regulation of emotion, including other aspects of the mental and behavioural process in this term.

During spontaneous right brain-to-right brain visual-facial, auditory-prosodic, and tactile-proprioceptive emotionally charged attachment communications, the sensitive, psychobiologically attuned caregiver regulates, at an implicit level, the infant's state of arousal. (p. 124)

Through this process of relationship the infant develops a "right brain emotional-corporeal implicit self, the biological substrate of the human unconscious" (Schore, 2012, p. 126). This stable sense of self is developed in relationship, maintained in relationship, and, when damaged, restored through relationship, and is, I believe, the same thing as spirit. So the

implicit self depends on relationship and relationship is dependent on the implicit self. Spirit, like this implicit self, is a name for the experience of a creative and sustaining relationship; in other words, a living process rather than something structural, a process Winnicott (1960) called “going on being”.

From this Self we may experience what are known as paranormal phenomena. Schore (2012) made the observation that the “conversation between limbic systems” (p.177) may be associated with telepathic and paranormal communication, citing research demonstrating right parietotemporal activation during the processing of paranormal information. The parietotemporal is the area where auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic information is gathered and assigned meaning and which has connection to the limbic and prefrontal cortex. Telepathic communication then, is processed in a similar way to any other communication. The *Yogasutra* addressed paranormal or heightened experiences similarly as a mix of skills and “powers” and also as something to be expected by someone practising focussed attention, but saw them as a potential impediment to maintaining a stable state of Self.

Patanjali’s *Yogasutra* and the Concept of Self and Spirit

The *Yogasutra* distinguished this stable state of Self, developed and sustained in relationship, from the structured but ever-changing state of self which could be called ego. The Self is described as the seer or perceiver and is described in non-material terms. The process of perception is expressed through the relationship between the ego and the world, and both ego and world are structural phenomena in a constant state of change and adaptation to each other. Self is identified with the stable, energetic relationship rather than the structured, changing ego. The *Yogasutra* talked of what Winnicott called the false self in terms of distorted perception. There are various forms and causes of distorted perception, all related to times when perception is clouded by the (mistaken) identification of the Self with the ego, whereas, in fact, clear perception (the Self) is a function of the relationship between ego and the rest of the world in the state of going on being.

When the perceptual distortion that arises from identifying with an ego state occurs, it leads to suffering. Conversely, suffering can be alleviated by returning to identification with the state of “going on being”. I am proposing that this state of going on being is relationship, whether with another, with one’s own person or with the environment.

Yoga teacher T. K. V. Desikachar expanded on this relationship when talking with Hellfried Krusche about the sutra concerning the farmer mentioned earlier: “The farmer is not the seed, the farmer is not the water. The farmer is not the earth; he is neither sand nor wind but understands everything concerning these things” (Desikachar in Desikachar & Krusche, 2007, p.186). Krusche responded: “The image of the farmer presents a relationship in which someone is living with the thing he works with. That is a living relationship” (p. 189). Desikachar agreed, pointing out the difference between the farmer and the agricultural scientist who might know about the work but is not necessarily in relationship with the land. In this conversation the teacher or analyst’s job of helping their student or patient recognise and clear blocks in order to help them be more fully in their Self and to be freer from suffering is contrasted with the place of theoretical knowledge; knowledge is important, but the ability to be in relationship is more so. Residing as it does in relationship, the process

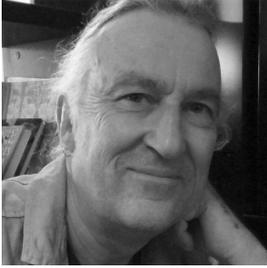
of perception can be named as “spirit”, but it is important not to reify it unless one is aware of doing so for the purposes of communicating about it. Reification occurs within Winnicott’s transitional phenomena and, like the person of Father Christmas, who could be said to stand for the spirit of generosity, is able to be talked about despite being a mythical phenomenon.

Summary

My hypothesis is that spirit is a name for the experience of going on being, a relational state that is formed in relationship, sustained by relationship, and recovered in relationship. Physiologically it is represented by emotional regulation and mentally by the practice of recognising that ego states are in relationship with each other and that the perceiving self resides in these relationships and in relationships with the outside world rather than within any ego state. With regard to my explorations of what it means to stand in the soul stream, I have come to the point of understanding this as referring to being fully present in relationship in a state of going on being. This is not exclusive of an understanding of nature, but, to the contrary, enhances our perception and grounding in reality in its constantly changing state.

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