

Techno-spirituality

Shifting beyond the Flow

Lucy Oliver

The terms techno-spirituality or psycho-spirituality suggest a modern approach to exploring human consciousness outside traditional religious frameworks, which generally includes leading-edge research into altered and non-ordinary states. It is a development facilitated by the rapid advancement of technology and pharmacology, allowing states of consciousness which were once generated within a spiritual context to be reproduced, manipulated, and monitored to order. An evolution perhaps, but certainly raising questions about the nature of spirituality.

A huge range of mechanisms for producing altered or higher states are automatically classed as “spiritual” activities, although differentiated from “religion” which is institutional, cultural and belief-based. Now with philosophical and even neuroscientific backing, it appears that spirituality is resurgent with a new wave of intelligent, high-functioning thinkers and practitioners.

As exciting and compelling as are the new possibilities, I would argue that for all its virtues, the thrust of much contemporary spirituality has actually lost its grip on Spirit. The field of Spirit, as it has been acknowledged and honored from ancient times is not secular, is not the same as humanism and is not defined by mind states or psychological codification. Also by its very nature, it is known in a manner above and beyond the measurable physiology that is correlated with it.

The rules for encountering Spirit are particular, and not the same as the field of scientific research, nor the field of modern psychology. Ultimately spirituality is not about human-centered issues at all, so not fundamentally the functional and personal benefits (happiness, well-being, health, peace, even insight or shift of perspective) which almost all modern versions target as objectives. By definition, spirituality is not humanism.

From a symbolic point of view, the earth has not been the center of our cosmos since Copernicus. The sun is no longer the center of our galaxy, and our galaxy is not the center of the universe. It is a true challenge to embrace the analogue of these shifts away from earth/human-centered perspectives. Just as the Ptolemaic world-view generated epi-cycles to account for perceived reality, sophisticated rational explanations can work very well—except for those areas which have to be excluded from the model as non-rational and non-scientific. These are exactly the arena of Spirit.

The problem is that we do not have the language to address Spirit outside traditional religious frameworks. There is presently no context for it that does not descend into superstition or psychism except within established traditional teachings and employing the language of those traditions. The reason is simple: Spirit speaks for itself; it inspires its own language. It can't be faked or concocted from mind, rationality, or emotion, and religious traditions have generally been the guardians of such speaking.

Although there are traditions of oral transmission outside institutional frames, the voice of the Spirit in human history has for the most part been preserved through religious systems. Many of these depict the spectrum of spiritual perception and reality in a series of levels ranging from the grossest materiality to the finest supersensible realms. One such is a simple model of four simultaneously existent hierarchical “worlds” as portrayed in the Kabbalah: Assiyah (the earthly realm), Yetzirah (the dimension of psyche), Briah (the realm of the spirit), and Atzilut (the level of the divine).

In ordinary usage a ‘world’ circumscribes a particular sphere of activity, with its own rules and parameters: eg. the world of fashion, the world of racing; the medical world etc. In daily living these different worlds inter-link and co-exist, and we choose whether or not to identify with them. In the same way, traditional four-world teaching depicts a hierarchy of human consciousness and potential experience ranging from grosser to finer states of perception. Each is a world, though interpenetrating hierarchically, so the finer ones are present within and infuse the densest and visible, which we call materiality.

Here I would like to recast these concepts in updated terms in order to reflect the principles behind the metaphysical structure and to provide a fresh perspective on contemporary trends.

We can characterize these four interpenetrating worlds as surface, flow, rhythm, and field, in ascending order from the densest (visible materiality) to the subtlest realm of experience. Renaming these worlds in demythologized terms opens them up for a contemporary context. It is also an exercise in abstract thinking, which, I argue, is a condition for the transition we need to make.

Surface is everything visible. It is all that we ever actually encounter with the senses: the surfaces of things, hard, shiny, colored, moving, still, textured, molecular, vibratory.

Flow describes psychological experiencing: how we interact with surfaces, the associations we make, the meaning we create. Flow embraces, connects, and responds to surrounding conditions, as water follows gravity and contour.

Rhythm interrupts flow and, once established, can sustain itself independently. Rhythms repeat, like the tides, the seasons, the beating heart. Beats are discrete. Cycles can be huge and work together.

Field may appear to have no flow or rhythm, but these dynamics are present, structuring the stillness and space. Any field is as wide as its hidden forces allow.

From Flow . . .

Modern psycho-spirituality prioritizes the cultivation of flow states, often assisted by pharmaceuticals in varying doses, especially microdoses of psychedelics and other mind-enhancing drugs, which have led to an explosion of fast, cutting-edge thinking in arenas like Silicon Valley. The flow state facilitates new connections and networks beyond normal mind processing and cognition (altered or non-ordinary states), activating powerful neurotransmitters, along with sensations of pleasure and meaningfulness. These states are also cultivated in the military, through extreme sports, or in any context where hyperperformance has a useful function, and are also explored for pleasure because of their addictive quality.

All these methods induce and amplify flow states, which are also valued for the change of vision and values they can inspire, which is where they appear to rival the traditional context of Spirituality. Meditation is also employed for functional purposes as one of the tools of 'spiritual technologies'.

Along with the potential benefit for individuals (there are of course dangers and downsides, including overdependence), altered states are heralded as a potential corrective to the world's current problems and crisis. It has been proposed that a phase shift is needed in the collective psyche, and that the type of awareness promoted through flow states may contribute to the new solutions and perspectives required for humanity's advancement or survival.

In addition to increasing functionality, flow feels harmonious, carrying thought and emotion as a river flows serenely to the sea. But rocks can interrupt that flow and create eddies, pools, changes in the current, turbulence. To generate power, the serenity must be dammed, then released in a fast torrent. Energy comes from interruption, yet the river is still flowing towards the sea. Its flow continues beneath and around the interruptions and different rhythms created in the phases of its journey. In rhythm is power.

... To Rhythm

In the hierarchy of worlds, rhythm lies beyond flow, and represents a jump, a transition to a different kind of perception, with different rules of engagement.

On the global stage, some leading futurist and systems thinkers are seeing the current disruption of the old social and political order as evidence of a phase shift. I suggest that we are actually faced with a global shift from the dominance of flow to a stage of rhythm. The eruptions of the unexpected are disrupting our comfort zone, and at present we haven't learned how to handle them. Making sense of the situation requires large overview thinking, based on the plausible hypothesis that what appears as interruption could be a manifestation of larger rhythms beyond our ken, whether planetary, social, or individual.

We don't as yet have a common mythological or spiritual framework to integrate the new possibilities that arise from breaking up the old order. New spiritual technologies may appear to represent an evolutionary advance, but they can also be regarded as a Promethean quest, stealing fire from the gods for human ends. Modern Titans don't see a need for God, and once it is possible to produce altered states technologically and at will, spirit can seem to mean no more than mind.

Yet consciousness experimentation, without trying to re-envision what spirit might mean, is Promethean. When one is stealing fire from the gods to power commercial or narcissistic enterprises, it would be wise to remember that Prometheus ended up tied to a rock with an eagle eating his liver.

It could also be argued that states of mind are not necessarily identical with states of being. Being grows over time, perhaps as the outcome of years of self-discipline, austerity, and learning, all of which allow time and space for the chthonic action of spirit.

By the testimony of the world's greatest sages and spiritual teachers, a shift towards the spirit is a movement towards simplicity—the transpersonal and formless. This contrasts with felt experiences, which are valued for their personal meaning and benefits. It is generally held that spiritual experiences per se are never the goal, but are merely confirmatory markers on the journey.

If new rhythms are imposed upon us as individuals, it may take a while to adjust, and a first response may be to resist and try to re-establish the familiar. To navigate the world of rhythm, a different kind of effort is required, perhaps involving less safety, more independence, a sense of heading into the unknown or navigating choppy waters. The hardest thing on an individual's journey is to leave behind the pleasures of flow, including the satisfaction of understanding and the ability to connect happenings and concepts into a coherent narrative. The effort to grasp principles is an important step towards appreciating the value of rhythm, along with thinking more abstractly and looking for wider patterns. This effort is combined with staying the course, keeping steady, trying to key in to subtle rhythms, and trusting that the flow is continuing underneath towards the ultimate “sea,” which we may equate with Spirit.

Beyond Flow

Flow is a great advance on chaos, suffering, and lack of direction, so people seek more flow in their lives, and, when possible, access to hyper-flow states. Flow states are the aim of many if not most contemporary meditation methods, including the ancient traditional forms as they are presented in retreat programs and similar venues (activating their full potential may require different conditions). Modern approaches also encourage and value felt experience over ideas of spiritual truth. Even powerful emotional experience is flow if an element of the personal remains.

By contrast, the force of rhythm is like the oscillation of tides at the edge of a great sea, pulled by other forces beyond. Underlying the body's living flow, and the flow of thought, are rhythmic heartbeats, brain waves, inhaling and exhaling, circadian rhythms, all outside normal conscious control, and sustaining life for the long term. Physical rhythms naturally interact with the psyche, but when a creative insight or transformative vision arrives out of the blue, it feels like an incursion from beyond the usual processes of mind, as if from some larger order or process whose rhythm is on a different time scale. Large cycles, tidal movements of energy, sometimes produce a wave, and at others recede. Results are never guaranteed, and may not be in a foreseeable form. All these are characteristics of the world of rhythm.

This creative dimension originates from the world of rhythm. Perceptions, thoughts, or actions seem to arise from emptiness, naturally, in the moment and perfectly suited to it. Although such illuminations or breakthroughs could be the results of long mental gestation processes cycling beneath the radar of consciousness, they frequently appear as sudden—a product of the effortless effort extolled by mystics and sages. At this point, their paradoxical statements start to have relevance, like a code to a different operating system.

The wisdom of the world of rhythm is supported by religious teachings of the East and West. They offer large-scale perspectives on the cosmos and human life as well practical methods for

developing nonattachment and steadiness. These methods are to be pursued without seeking results or being invested in outcomes. An example is the special kind of vision which Zen teaching calls seeing into the nature, which penetrates beneath the surface of things and through the flow of experience.

Clear States

Moments of such true seeing often occur in what could be called a clear state, which is devoid of the emotional high of the flow state. When awareness is open or still, the seed of an idea, thought, or perception can arise like a pulsation, which, then or later, takes on formation, perhaps while one is walking, doing some task, or sitting quietly. Seeing is a grasp of some truth or essence, which then develops through the flow of thought to manifest to the senses as surface once it is written out or acted upon.

The creativity of clear states can be quiet and unspectacular; their power is in consistency and hidden force. The mind can be trained to achieve these states through concentration on abstract symbols, which are themselves potent repositories of meaning irreducible to rational or intellectual thought. This process is a stage in the growth of consciousness toward the genuinely spiritual, and is often expressed in terms of emptiness, selflessness, or unconditioned Being. However, there is yet one higher world.

Into the Field

The developing technologies of flow are helping to concentrate our attention on the qualities of different states of mind and emotion, but as previously suggested, disruptions in the political and social flow of the status quo is exactly what could be expected of a collective phase shift, which is demanding a different rhythm and approach.

It might be heartening to look beyond this transition, into the highest, most subtle of worlds in this traditional formulation—the world of field. The other levels make more sense when viewed from this total context. There isn't yet a language for field awareness in common currency. Note, however, that global and futuristic thinkers routinely use metaphors taken from the digital world. These thinkers are in effect generating a new mythology with their new metaphors, which, once you get the reference, work beautifully to articulate new thinking.

Watch a meditator settle the body into stillness, as the mind flow abates or moves to the periphery of attention, the rhythms of the breath become fine and imperceptible, and the field of experience become wide and without conditioned contours. It is like the moment just before a leap, all living forces held in check but potent, ready.

Ready for what?

To engage with the mystery of life. Despite all advances, we know neither the source nor the outcome of our own life, or of any life, or of the cosmos and the eons of its existence. The truly wise become so by acknowledging our participation in great cycles and rhythms, and may call this awareness Spirit, or God, or the Unconditioned, or a name of similar order. The power inherent in the macrocosm of the created universe, or in the microcosm of humanity, is not

subject to measurement in a laboratory and never will be. This is getting closer to what I, like our ancestors, have understood as Spirit.

The meditator or sage is a technologist of the infinite not yet superseded. All genuine spiritual teachings preserve the wisdom that there is much further to go beyond flow consciousness, but actualising this potential makes demands that only a few of us are willing to meet. In meditation we are assisted to traverse flow states and navigate the phases of rhythm by regular guidance, which is both a support and a training in the discernment and differentiation of the states of flow and field (however they are named). Rhythm and repetition are essential elements in the training of meditation, as in repeated letting go or bringing the mind back, and attention to the rhythms of breath, body, sound or image.

The creativity of rhythm arises from the unimpededness of field. Once all rhythms have become superfine, field is present. Field is Presence, without an “I” to enjoy or observe it. There is nothing to be done here, except return often and know that it goes with one at all times. Beyond it lies the Unconditioned.

“Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?” God demanded of Job (Job 41:1), finally extracting from him an acknowledgment that Leviathan, like all the works of God, are beyond human creativity and manipulation. With that admission, Job became aware of the field from which the creative arises, and his suffering was lifted. If an unnameable, indefinable God or Spirit infuses all the worlds of experience, acknowledging this reality is the only true basis for spirituality.

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