Science and Spiritual Practices: Transformative Experiences and Their Effects on Our Bodies, Brains, and Health

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In his latest book, Rupert Sheldrake once again acts as a bridge builder between science and spirituality. He singles out seven types of spiritual practice, clarifying their techniques and history, and showing how they can benefit us. As defined here, they
are: meditation, gratitude, ritual, singing and chanting, connecting to the "more-than-human world," relating to plants, and going on pilgrimage. Psychological and scientific studies are cited to underpin his findings, and an engaging account of his own life path helps to create a very accessible and authentic tone for the reader. Along with an injection of personal experience goes a careful analysis of each practice. Meditation, for instance, is described in terms of both its techniques and its effects, a useful, clear overview of a topic which has become blurred by recent popularization.

Eminently qualified as a biologist (Cambridge University, Harvard, Britain’s Royal Society) Sheldrake is certainly able to hold his own among other scientists. He is chiefly known for his theory of species memory, set out in A New Science of Life. As he says, after his early training as a scientist, he found that he could not ultimately accept a mechanistic, "bottom-up" theory of building the universe and sought for a "top down" one instead, starting with the organizing principles of consciousness: "A new idea occurred to me: there might be a kind of memory in nature giving direct connections across time from past to present organisms, providing each species with a kind of collective memory of form and behaviour." This he called "morphic resonance."

The implications of this proposition, which Sheldrake went on to affirm through scientific studies, are huge. If we as individuals have access to the human memory and mind, and if that human mind is part of a greater consciousness, we have possibilities of partaking in a transcendent cosmic life. This may not be new in spiritual terms—there is, for example, the concept of the "great man," Adam Kadmon, in Kabbalah, representing the sum of human consciousness—but Sheldrake gives us new ground to stand on in making sense of divergent scientific and spiritual views of the cosmos.

In this book he gives us further ground for exploring this concept by applying his theory of memory to ritual. He suggests that if we conduct a time-honored ritual with precision and clear intention, we may tap into the experiences of all those who have practiced it before, empowering it to a high degree. Some of his theories may be more speculative—I’m not entirely convinced that baptism was originally designed to induce a near-death experience (and that it was touchy and go whether it became a real drowning experience instead!) However, it gives food for thought, and a good investigator should be allowed some license with ideas—you never know when they might turn out to be true.

As Sheldrake’s work is controversial among scientists, it’s a testimony to his courage and integrity that he continues to harness the horses of both science and spirituality to pull the chariot, and he drives his vehicle well. He is an Anglican by faith—a faith he rediscovered when an Eastern guru suggested he should return to the church of his ancestors—but with experience of Sufism, Indian teaching, and even atheism. (Experiencing atheism, with its chilling nihilism, I would say from personal experience is a very good grounding for expanding your view when you reconnect with a religious perspective.) Sheldrake also offers practical advice, giving a few exercises at the end of each chapter. These are rather general in comparison with the detailed analysis of each practice that precedes them, but will probably be helpful to some readers as pointers.

And he reveals his own efforts to put these ideas into practice, coleading a movement to reawaken interest in the beautiful and uplifting service of evensong in the Anglican church.

Sheldrake’s themes contain the unexpected too: gratitude surprised me as a choice for a spiritual exercise, but, as he summarizes his findings, “being grateful makes us part of this mutual, life-enhancing flow. Being ungrateful separates us from it. When we are part of this flow, we generally feel happier than when we are not part of it, whether we call ourselves atheists or not.” I am resolved to heed his advice.

Further information on Rupert Sheldrake’s books and current projects at https://www.sheldrake.org/. For more on evensong, see https://www.choralevensong.org/.

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