ABSTRACT: The validity of the pre/trans fallacy in relation to childhood spirituality is questioned, suggesting that ‘pre-egoic’ spirituality is as valid as ‘trans-egoic,’ and stems from the same source, although different in some important respects. Sources of spiritual experiences and states in general are examined, and childhood is proposed as a state with ready access to these, although mainly to lower intensity spiritual states. The childhood state is innately more ‘spiritual’ than the adult in two senses: firstly, children have fundamentally ‘spiritual’ characteristics as a stable structure of being (albeit of a lower intensity), and secondly, they appear to have easier access to higher intensity spiritual experiences (that is, higher than their normal stable structure of being). A framework of spiritual experiences and spiritual development is offered that includes the consideration of childhood spirituality. Mature spirituality means integrating the natural spirituality of childhood with the great intellectual and practical benefits conferred by the adult ego.

Like the notion that tribal indigenous peoples are more ‘spiritual’ than post-enlightenment western peoples, there is a romantic belief – put forward by figures such as Wordsworth, Blake and Rousseau – that childhood is a period of heightened spiritual sensibility, which is lost as we enter adulthood (e.g. Wordsworth, 1950; Rousseau, 1979). According to this view, children are more connected to nature, experience a natural sense of well-being, and have an intense vision of the world which enables them to see the world – as Wordsworth (1950) described the infant’s vision in his poem Intimations of Immortality – ‘apparelled in celestial light, the glory and freshness of a dream’ (Poems, p. 71.) Or as Ernest Becker put it, children are awake to the ‘raw experience’ of the world. They experience a ‘vision of the primary miraculousness of creation,’ and their perceptions of the world are ‘suffused…in emotion and wonder’ (1973, p. 50).

However, Wilber (2000/2002/2005) has disputed that children can have this ready access to the transpersonal realms. As he sees it, the transpersonal levels are not easily accessible until the ego becomes fully formed as a structure, when formal-operative cognition develops. From Wilber’s hierarchical perspective, to say that children are somehow spiritually more advanced than adults is like saying that it is possible to reach the higher ranges of the Himalayas without ascending through the lower ranges first.

Wilber agrees that spiritual experiences may be possible during childhood – particularly of the ‘trailing clouds of glory’ type, as a lingering sense of the bliss
and radiance and pure awareness of the pre-birth realms (e.g. Wilber, 2000; see also Armstrong, 1984). He also makes it clear that transpersonal experiences are accessible irrespective of the individual’s level of development. As he has written, “A person at any level can have a state experience of gross, subtle, or causal realms, because those natural states are freely available at every stage” (2002, p. 52). Or more specifically in the same text, “an infant wakes, dreams, and sleeps – it therefore has fully available the three great states (and the three great realms – gross, subtle, causal)” (2002, p. 5).

Nevertheless, Wilber sees the ‘spiritual’ view of childhood as a form of retro-romanticism, and an example of the pre/trans fallacy. The infant’s state of being may have some parallels with that of the mystic – for example, a lack of a strong ego-boundary which means that there is de-differentiation between self and the environment. But, according to Wilber, this is emphatically not equivalent to the state of unification with the cosmos experienced by mystics. For him, childhood spiritual experiences are anomalous and infrequent rather than natural and regular.

A long history of research exists, however, vouching for the frequency of spiritual experience during childhood, which is difficult to account for in terms of Wilber’s model. For example, Bindl (1965) found evidence that experiences of the ‘numinous’ were common in children under 7, but became less frequent in older children. In a survey of grammar school pupils and young college students by Pafford (1973), 40% of boys and 61% of girls said that they had had experiences of ‘nature mysticism’ similar to those described by Wordsworth. In Alister Hardy’s research at the Oxford University Religious Research Unit, childhood and adolescence were the most common frequencers of religious experience: 111.7 from a thousand during childhood, and 123.7 during adolescence (Hardy, 1979).

Specific studies of childhood spirituality also exist–such as Edward Hoffman’s *Visions of Innocence* (1992), and E.O. Robinson’s *The Original Vision* (1977)–containing hundreds of reports of apparently genuine mystical experiences. Most of these reports (some of which I will be referring to in this article) are difficult to distinguish from descriptions of adult spiritual experiences. In addition, there are many general collections of spiritual experiences–such as Hardy’s *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (1979) and Raynor C. Johnson’s *Watcher on the Hills* (1988)–which include many childhood experiences¹.

Robinson and Hoffman both found that these experiences could occur as early as 3 years old, although they were most common between the ages of 5 and 15. Robinson (1977) studied 600 childhood spiritual experiences, and found that 10% occurred before the age of 5, 70% between 5 and 15 and 19% after the age of 15. Of the 123 experiences published by Hoffman (1992), 23% occurred before the age of 5, and 77% between 5 and 15.

Edwards (2003) suggests that reports of childhood spiritual experiences are questionable because they are retrospective–sometimes elderly people describing experiences they had as 4 years old–and conveyed in language which
children could not possibly use. However, as Piechowski (2001) argues, spiritual experiences are so powerful and unusual that they are remembered much more vividly and with less distortion than other experiences. In addition, the memories of children are more reliable than is generally believed. For example, Sheingold and Tenney (1982) found that 3 and 4 year olds can recall the events of a year ago with a great deal of accuracy, and no less accurately than 8 year olds. And in relation to language, spiritual experiences are by their nature ‘trans-lingual.’ Even as adults we struggle to describe them, with the subject/object duality of language, the different tenses and the paucity of vocabulary for refined and intense states of awareness. An adult will certainly be able to explain the experience more clearly than a child, but only because of their wider vocabulary and ability to use metaphor. But that has no bearing on the experience itself, which exists prior to and beyond language.

**Childhood as a Stable Spiritual Structure**

There are close parallels between the approach I am going to take and that of Michael Washburn (1995, 2002). Washburn relates the joy and wonder of infancy with the child’s openness to the ‘Dynamic Ground,’ or the deep psyche. But gradually the ego develops and begins to ‘repress’ the Ground. By early adulthood the ego has become alienated from it and is deprived of its vitality. The ego views the body as a separate entity, a vehicle it is trapped inside. According to Washburn, spiritual or transpersonal development is a process of re-opening to the Dynamic Ground, of undoing the separateness of the ego and reintegrating it within our being, “regression in the service of transcendence,” as he refers to it (Washburn, 1995, p. 220). The ego still exists as a structure but not as an autonomous isolated entity. We—the ego—now have access again to the intense spiritual energy of the Ground. Early childhood and the transpersonal ‘spiritual’ state are not ontologically distinct, as the pre/trans fallacy suggests. They are both states of connection to the Dynamic Ground, but the Ground expresses itself differently in them, in a ‘pre’ or ‘trans’ form (Washburn, 2003).

Grof’s approach has some similarities. For him, as for Washburn, the pre/trans fallacy does not apply, since transpersonal development involves a re-encounter with the original ground unconscious, which is the source of embryonic experiences of mystical unity. As he states: “During episodes of undisturbed embryonal existence, we typically have experiences of vast regions with no boundaries or limits. We can identify with galaxies, interstellar space, or the entire cosmos” (1990, p. 37). Adult mystical experiences recapture this experience in a mature form.

These approaches are similar to that originally advocated by Wilber—the Wilber-1 model (as he refers to it himself), when he believed that human development proceeds “from unconscious Heaven to conscious Hell to conscious Heaven” (1996, p. x). Of course, Wilber has long since repudiated this view, believing that it was based on the logically impossible premise of the adult ‘losing’ union with the divine. “All things are one with the Divine
Ground…To lose oneness with that Ground is to cease to exist” (p.xi). But this is itself a logically flawed statement. To lose oneness with the Divine does not mean ceasing to exist. It is possible to exist and be essentially one with the Divine but to lose the experience of this oneness, to be alienated from the essence of your being which is one with the Divine. In fact, this is our essential problem as adults. Wilber’s (1996) revised view is that human development is actually a process of moving from unconscious hell to conscious hell and then conscious heaven. Children are immersed in samsara, but are simply unaware of it, in a state of blissful ignorance.

I believe that Washburn, Grof and Wilber-1 are essentially correct, in that children’s state of being has ‘spiritual’ qualities in two senses: firstly, children have fundamentally ‘spiritual’ characteristics as a stable structure of being, and secondly, they appear to have easy access to higher level spiritual experiences (that is, higher than their normal stable state of being).

This is certainly not to say that childhood is in any way a ‘higher’ state than adulthood. The adult ego gives us massive benefits – abstract and logical thought, conceptual knowledge, self-reflection, impulse control, reality testing, exercise of the will, the ability to take perspectives, to organise, to make decisions, to plan, to manipulate our surroundings and live autonomously (Jung, 1988; Loevinger, 1976; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1996). It is precisely because of their undeveloped ego that children are unable to deal with the practical demands of life, and need such intense nurturing. The development of the ego is undoubtedly a massive developmental progression. I am merely suggesting that, in order for this progression—and for these benefits—to occur, certain ‘spiritual’ characteristics of childhood are inevitably de-intensified. As will be seen later, this is mainly a consequence of the ‘re-distribution’ of psychic energy which the development of the adult ego brings.

In order to examine this controversial issue, we should perhaps briefly outline some of the most prevalent characteristics of spiritual experiences in general. The following summary will no doubt already be familiar to many readers of this journal, but I believe it is important to clarify these characteristics, in order to examine whether childhood as a stable state might include them.

Spiritual experiences can occur at different levels of intensity, moving from a simple heightening of perception (the first characteristic below) to a high intensity experience such as nirvikalpa samadhi, or—in the Christian mystical tradition—‘deification.’ The characteristics I present below are roughly progressive and cumulative, unfolding through greater degrees of intensity of spiritual experience. They are based on my own studies and collected reports of spiritual experiences (Taylor, 2005a, 2009, in press), as well as the research and findings of Underhill (1911/1960), James (1902/1985), Johnson (1960/1988), Laski (1961), Hardy (1979) and Happold (1963/1986). The experiences often occur in a passive, solitary and individual context (e.g. during or after meditation, or when a person is alone in nature) but it is important not to forget that, as Ferrer (2002) has emphasised, they can occur in a participatory, communal and active context too, such as during lovemaking, a group artistic
performance (or amongst the audience of such a performance), or group sporting activities (e.g. Murphy & Whyte, 1995: Taylor, in press; Wade, 2000).

**Characteristics of Spiritual Experiences**

Nine characteristics of spiritual experiences, with childhood examples, will be discussed, divided into lower to medium intensity experiences (characteristics 1–5) and medium to high intensity spiritual experiences (characteristics 6–9).

**Lower to Medium Intensity Spiritual Experiences**

1. *A transformation of our normal vision of reality, with a more intense perception of the phenomenal world.*
   Phenomena which normally do not seem beautiful or interesting—and which we do not normally pay attention to—suddenly seem to possess a new kind of ‘is-ness’. They seem brighter, more colourful and more intricate, and to have more depth and perspective. Evelyn Underhill refers to this as “a clarity of vision, a heightening of physical perception” (in Deikman, 1980, p. 249). Or in William James’ words: “An appearance of newness beautifies every object” (p. 249).

2. *A sense of the aliveness of phenomena which normally appear inanimate. The world literally comes to life.*
   Objects which normally only have a one-dimensional surface reality assume a new depth and a new being.

3. *A sense of meaning, or of an atmosphere of harmony and benevolence pervading our surroundings or the world as a whole.*
   There is a sense that ‘all is well.’

4. *A sense of inner well-being, of peace, bliss or joy.*
   For example, some of the experiences collected by Hardy (1979) at the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford University (now at the University of Wales in Lampeter) contain descriptions of a “a feeling of absolute bliss…a feeling of intoxication, so great was the happiness” (p. 62), “a sense of lightness, exhilaration and power” (p. 35) and “I was filled with a great surge of joy” (p. 20).

5. *Moving towards a medium level of intensity, spiritual experiences bring an awareness of what Vedantic philosophy calls brahman.*
   The person—or persons—may become aware of Spirit in the world, pervading all things and the spaces between things. This is what the Chandogya Upanishad describes as “an invisible and subtle essence [which] is the Spirit of the universe” (Mascaro, 1990, p. 117). In a sense, this awareness is simply an intensification of characteristics 2 and 3: the individual realises that this ‘Spirit-force’ is what makes so-called ‘inanimate objects’ alive, and the source of the harmony and the radiance we can perceive. At the lower levels the effects of this force are perceived, even if the person is not able to perceive the force itself directly. But now they realise that this radiance and harmony emanate from an ocean of Spirit which fills the whole universe and is the essence of reality.
Childhood Correspondences

There are, I believe, many correspondences between these characteristics and children’s normal experience of the world. For example, the kind of intense, vivid perception which characterises spiritual experiences (no. 1) appears to be normal for young children. The spiritual experience researcher Edward Robinson collected many reports of adults who describe their normal childhood awareness as extremely intense and vivid. One spoke of having a “clear awareness, almost like a radar” (p 43), and having “a more direct relationship with flowers, trees and animals” (p. 42). Another used the description by the Victorian author John Ruskin, who wrote that as a child he had “a continual perception of sanctity in the whole of nature—from the slightest thing to the vastest” (p. 56).

This intense infant perception has been noted by developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik, who has declared her belief that “babies and young children are actually more conscious, more vividly aware of their external world and internal life, than adults are” (2005). As Schachtel (1959) saw it, children have two basic modes of perception: autocentric (which emphasises sensory quality and pleasure or displeasure in what one sees) and allocentric (the immediate and direct perception of the nature of objects, without familiarity or conceptual prejudice.) However, during adulthood ‘secondary autocentricity’ dominates. The immediate sensory qualities of objects and their nature are less important, as we begin to perceive objects in terms of their utility, and in terms of pre-existing concepts. We lose what Loevinger (1976) described as “the child’s allocentric openness to the world” (p. 145). As a consequence, our “enjoyment of the sensuous encounter with the world” is reduced (p. 145). Loevinger speculated that the child’s “openness to experience” (p. 147) may be regained at higher levels of ego development, at the self-actualisation level identified by Maslow, or what she herself referred to as ‘integrated.’

Similarly, Werner (1957) saw parallels between the “perceptual and cognitive functioning” of children and indigenous peoples, compared to adult westerners or Europeans. The perception and cognition of children and indigenous people were more “vivid and sensuous” as well as syncretic and animated, and “de-differentiated with respect to the distinctions between self and object and between objects” (p. 152). According to Werner, this perceptual intensity fades as abstract and reflective thought develop, bringing a loss of the “sensuousness, fullness of detail, the color and vivacity of the image” (p. 152). This is supported by Shapiro’s (1960) study of children’s responses to Rorschach images, which showed that as they grow older, children are less attentive to sensory aspects of the cards (such as colour and texture) but more attentive to meaning, shape and size. Deikman explains this in terms of the process of ‘automatization’ of perception, which conserves psychic energy but “is paid for by a foreclosure of possibilities, a dulling or “jading” of sensory experience that is an all-too-common occurrence” (1966, p. 112).

In a similar way, young children often appear to perceive the world around them as alive. They appear to sense the inner subjectivity of things, as in
characteristic no. 2 above. (This is suggested by Werner’s characterisation of childhood perception as “animated.”) In *Visions of Innocence* (Hoffman, 1992), several people describe this sense that trees, flowers and other natural phenomena were sentient beings with whom they could communicate. One woman describes how, at the age of 4, she became attached to a particular tree when camping with her parents:

I liked the trunk’s warm, rough surface. Its life and strength seemed to flow into me…I was away from other people, where I could be myself and yet part of a strong life force *beyond* myself. (Hoffman, 1992, p. 23)

Similarly, a 69 year old minister describes how, as a child growing up on the coast of Nova Scotia, he had a “strong sense of the numinous–and warmth and peace–that accompanied some of nature’s moods” (Hoffman, p. 33). While a woman told Hoffman how, as a child, she was always aware that nature was alive and had a “definite soul”:

Not only the trees would speak to me, but also the plants, streams, and even the stones. In the Harz Mountains we would often picnic next to a certain brook. In those years there were few tourists, and I’d frequently sit for hours without moving and listen to its sound. When I would find an especially beautiful rock on the road, I would take it, feel it, observe it, smell it, taste it, and listen to its voice. (Hoffman, 1992, p. 24)

These descriptions hint at characteristic no. 3 too. The natural world seems to be a benign and meaningful place, pervaded with an atmosphere of harmony.

Many poets and authors have remembered their childhood in similar terms to these. Aside from Wordsworth, the mystic poet Henry Vaughan described his childhood as a time when he saw “shadows of eternity” and “bright shoots of everlastingness” in the world (in Jacobs, 2002, p. 173) while his near contemporary Thomas Traherne described his childhood as a state when “All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful” (in Happold, 1986, p. 368).

The sense of well-being which spiritual experiences bring (no. 4) has clear correspondences with childhood experience too. Particularly during what Loevinger (1976) described as the ‘impulsive stage,’ children experience discontent frequently, when they are tired, insecure or when their powerful impulses are frustrated. Some children also suffer trauma and abuse at the hands of their carers or others, making them withdrawn and disturbed. But in general, children have a powerful *joie de vivre*, an infectious positivity which makes being with them a massive pleasure. They may experience brief storms of upset or anger–again, this is particularly characteristic of the impulsive stage, where emotions are very intense (Loevinger, 1976). However, children always quickly return to a foundation of natural happiness. They respond to everything (and everyone) with the same “openness to experience” (Loevinger). Washburn describes this state excellently:
The pre-symbolic infant is bathed in the water of life; ripples and waves of delicious energy move through the infant’s body, filling it with delight. When its needs are satisfied and it is otherwise content, the presymbolic infant experiences a sea of dynamic plenitude, blissful fullness. (1995, p. 82)

Characteristic no. 5 is, I believe, one which may sometimes be permanently present in childhood. The descriptions above of a ‘strong life force’ or of nature as ‘numinous’ or with a ‘definite soul’ certainly suggest an awareness of ‘spirit-force’ or Brahman pervading the world. However, from my readings of the reports of childhood spirituality this awareness does not occur as commonly or as strongly as the other characteristics.

The above descriptions are so similar to the characteristics of spiritual experiences described by mystics and others that this is clearly not a question of parallel, as the pre/trans fallacy would suggest. They suggest that spiritual experiences are accessible from both the pre-egoic and trans-egoic levels. There can be pre-egoic spiritual experiences and states, as well as trans-egoic. At the same time, I accept that there are certain aspects of trans-egoic spiritual experiences which are not a part of pre-egoic, and will discuss these differences below.

Medium to High Intensity Spiritual Experiences in Childhood

Note that so far I have only spoken of childhood in terms of lower to medium level intensity spiritual experiences, which are more or less equivalent to what Wilber describes as ‘gross level mysticism.’ I believe that childhood as a state includes these aspects (up to no. 4 and sometimes no. 5), but not the characteristics of higher intensity spiritual experiences. Childhood as a state includes elements of gross level mysticism, but not—in Wilber’s model—the causal, subtle or integral. Wilber (2005) rejects the romantic view of childhood because “the infant is not living in nirvana or nirvikalpa samadhi by any stretch of the imagination, and there is not a single tradition that claims it is” (p. 30). However, I am certainly not claiming that children are “enlightened.” It is a question of degrees; I am only suggesting that the normal state of being of children contains aspects of lower intensity spiritual states which are lacking from our normal adult state.

However, children certainly do have access to the higher transpersonal levels. To adapt and reverse the metaphor I used right at the start of this essay: if children’s stable state is one of lower level spirituality, then they should have easy access to the higher levels in the same way that climbers at the base camp of Everest have easier access to its higher points than people way down below them at sea level.

In this section, I will list further common characteristics of spiritual experiences, this time from medium to higher levels of intensity. Again, this is based on my own studies and collected reports of spiritual experiences (Taylor, 2005a, 2009, in press), as well as the research and findings of Underhill
6. As the awareness of Spirit in the world intensifies, the normal sense of the separation of objects fades away. They are all expressions of the same force, and that force pervades them and the spaces between them, folding everything into its embrace. The difference between, say, a tree and a cloud is only the same as the difference between one wave of the sea and another—they are made of the same essence and part of same ocean of being.

7. The normal sense of separateness between the individual(s) and the world begins to fall away too. There is no I (or we) 'in here' and a world 'out there.' The spiritual essence of the self is experienced as the same spiritual essence which fills the cosmos. As a result, the individual(s) become everything. For example, in reports given to the Religious Experience Research Unit, one person describes “a unification of myself with the external world. I did not lose my identity, yet all things and I somehow entered into each other” (Hardy, 1979, p. 56). Another reports how she “was extending into my surroundings and becoming one with them” (Hardy, p. 37). At this level, individuals may feel that they have transcended the linearity of time as well as the separateness of objects. Time may seem to be massively expanded, or to disappear altogether.

   This sense of oneness can also generate an intense sense of compassion for other living beings. By sharing their being, individuals empathise intensely with others, feel their joys and sufferings, and experience an intense sense of connection and compassion, which may be described as love.

8. In terms of their experience of their own being, individuals may also feel that they have made contact with a deeper part of their being, a spiritual essence. An ‘identity shift’ takes place. They realise that the ego-self which they assumed was their true self before is only really a kind of limited and false shadow self. Now they feel that they have become a more stable, deep-rooted self with a much wider and clearer awareness. In the words of the Indian sage Patanjali, when we “restrict the whirls of consciousness” the transcendental Self appears (in Feuerstein, 1990, p. 171).

9. Moving towards the highest intensity of spiritual experiences, individuals’ awareness expands beyond the boundaries of the normal self until the awareness of being an ‘I’ falls away completely. They do not just feel that they are one with the universe, but that they are the universe. The material world dissolves away; the world of objects and natural phenomena are ‘drowned’ in an ocean of pure Spirit-force. Individuals enter into the absolute essence of reality, the ‘ground’ of pure spirit which underlies everything and pervades everything. They realise that this ground of pure spirit is the source of all things, that the world is its manifestation, that its energy ‘pours out’ into the world, and that the nature of this energy is bliss and love.

Although these characteristics are not part of childhood experience as a stable state, there are many instances of children ‘peaking’ into these higher realms.
There is a negative correlation between the intensity and the frequency of spiritual experiences. For example, in a British survey by Hay and Heald (1987), 16% of people reported sensing a sacred presence in nature on at least one occasion (possibly characteristic no. 5), whereas only 5% of people reported sensing the unity of all things (no. 6), and this appears to apply to childhood experiences too. While characteristics 6 and 7 are described frequently in reports, no. 9 is less common.

Characteristic no. 7 occurs time and again in the reports. Here is a sample of descriptions from the reports:

At the age of “barely three”: “It was as if I was part of the flowers, and stones, and dusty earth. I could feel the dandelions pulsating in the sunlight, and experienced a timeless unity with all life” (Robinson, 1977, p. 49).

No age specified: “I felt myself for a fleeting moment to be part of a world of meaning, unrestricted by spacetime” (Robinson, p. 55).

4 years old: “A door opened, and I became the sun, the wind, and the sea. There was no ‘I’ anymore. ‘I’ had merged with everything else. All sensory perceptions had become one. Sound, smell, taste, touch, shape – all melted into a brilliant light. The pulsating energy went through me, and I was part of this energy” (Hoffman, 1992, pp. 39).

“About 3 years old”: “A euphoric unification with the space in front of me and all around” (Hoffman, p. 96).

“During the fourth grade, an experience which occurred frequently: I would have days when… I would feel a tremendous connectedness to everything and everyone. Everything was one. I could see the connection between all things” (Hoffman, p. 101).

However, characteristic no. 9 appears to be very rare in childhood experiences, for reasons which will be suggested in a moment. The published reports of childhood spiritual experiences only contain a very small number of examples of high intensity experiences such as nirvikalpa samadhi, or union with the Divine Ground. The following experience occurred when the person was 3 or 4:

As I faced the blankness in my mind’s eye, I gradually became aware that my identity transcended all these memories: that ‘I had no form or name, no history, and filled this blankness or emptiness as an immensity extending to infinity. This awesome feeling lasted for several minutes, and then I became aware of myself as a little boy peering out of the bushes. (Hoffman, 1992, p. 125)

The following person describes a “spiritual technique” she developed at the age of 8 or 9, of “tumbling back” into a “secure void”:

During time alone in my room, I would often ‘tumble back’ into another reality focusing on what was here before the universe or anything else
existed. I would tumble further and further into this secure void, relishing the feeling of quiet detachment, almost floating. (Hoffman, 1992, p 152)

THE SOURCES OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Such pre-egoic spirituality need not be seen as anomalous or inferior if we examine the sources of spiritual experience. I have suggested elsewhere (Taylor, 2005a, 2009, in press) that two significant sources of spiritual experience are (a) disruption of the normal homeostasis of the human organism, brought on by fasting, self-inflicted pain, sleep deprivation, drugs, frenzied dancing etc., and (b) what I have called an ‘intensification and stilling of life-energy,’ generated by meditation, prayer, prolonged concentration during sports, encounters with nature, silence and solitude, sex, a near-death experience, playing or listening to music, satsang experiences, kundalini experiences etc. In the next section, I will examine this ‘energetic’ source of spiritual experience, and then suggest it as a framework for understanding childhood spirituality.

By ‘life-energy’ I mean the entire non-physical energy of our being, the sum total of our inner vitality, which can be expressed in different ways. It can be expressed and used through mental functions such as cognition, perception, concentration or attention, when it appears as psychic or attentional energy. It can be expressed and used through emotional activity, where it might be called emotional energy. It can be expressed and used sexually, where it appears as sexual energy, and so forth. We can feel this energy moving powerfully through our ‘inner body’ after yoga or other forms of exercise. When it is blocked to certain parts of the body, and generally at a low level, it may lead to illness.

Again, there are commonalities between Washburn’s approach and mine here. He suggests that our essential life-energy expresses itself in three different ways: as psychic energy, as libido (or sexual energy), and as spiritual power. He notes that one of the differences between these expressions of energy is that while psychic energy is used continually, fuelling our ongoing conscious experience, libido and spiritual power are both ‘potential’ energies, which are usually latent but become ‘activated’ by certain stimuli (Washburn, 2002). Similarly, Jung saw psychic energy as the power behind every facet of experience—including cognition, concentration, instinct and sexual desire—which was at the same time of a different nature to that experience. As he saw it, psychic energy could be actual, manifesting itself as the “dynamic phenomena of the psyche, such as instinct, wishing, willing, affect, attention, capacity for work etc.” Or it could be potential, when it shows itself as “possibilities, aptitudes [and] attitudes” (Jung, 1928/1988. p. 15).

In normal circumstances, as Washburn notes, there is a constant ‘outflow’ of life-energy, because of our constant mental and emotional activity. But in certain circumstances—such as during or after meditation or while performing certain sports—this ‘outflow’ ceases and our life-energy becomes intensified and stilled, creating the conditions leading to spiritual experience.
Novak (1996) notes that the “endless associational chatter” of our minds monopolises psychic energy, leaving none available for us to devote to what he calls “open, receptive and present-centred awareness” (p. 277). Deikman (1980, p. 256) makes a similar connection between mystical experiences and energy when he suggests that they are

...brought about by a deautomatization of hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goods of survival...Under special conditions of dysfunction, such as in acute psychosis or in LSD states, or under special goal conditions such as exist in religious mystics, the pragmatic systems of automatic selection are set aside or break down, in favour of alternate modes of consciousness.

In other words, the quietening of associational chatter, or ‘thought-chatter,’ as I have called it elsewhere (Taylor, 2005b, in press) creates a ‘surplus’ of energy which means that there is no need for these structures to conserve energy anymore. As a result our perceptions become de-automatized, and we develop an intensified awareness of the phenomenal world.

Significantly, as well as being intensified, in meditative states our life-energy is stilled. At the same time as using up a large portion of our energy, the constant thought-chatter of our minds creates disturbance inside us. In Meister Eckhart’s (1987, p. 14) phrase, there is a “storm of inward thoughts,” a chaos of swirling images and impressions which we have no control over. But in meditation most of this disturbance may fade away. As the chattering of our mind slows down and fades away, so do our desires and emotions (which are largely triggered by thought-chatter), so that our being becomes still and peaceful, like the still surface of lake.

This ‘stilling’ of life-energy always goes together with its intensification. The two cannot happen separately. In order for it to be intensified, life-energy has to be stilled. Our thought-chatter and emotions and desires have to be stilled in order to ‘harness’ the energy which they normally dissipate.

Meditation is, we might say, a conscious attempt to intensify and still our life-energy, both in the short and long term. (In the long term it is an attempt to permanently halt the ‘associational chatter’ of the mind, which may lead to a permanent alteration of the structures of consciousness.) However, there are situations in which life-energy may be intensified and stilled more accidentally, and give rise to higher states of consciousness. This is probably, for example, the reason why natural surroundings are a frequent trigger of spiritual or mystical experiences (Hardy, 1979; Hay, 1987; Laski, 1961). The beauty of nature may have an effect similar to a mantra in meditation, directing attention away from the chattering of the ego-mind. Cognitive activity may fade away, until life-energy intensifies, bringing a sense of inner peace and wholeness and heightened awareness of the phenomenal world. An additional factor here may be the energy which natural surroundings themselves ‘transmit’ to us. Nature
itself appears to have a certain quality of purity and serenity which creates a calm, peaceful state of being.

The incidence of spiritual experiences amongst athletes and sportspeople (e.g. Murphy & Whyte, 1995; Taylor, 2002) can be explained in similar terms. Some of these may be due to homeostasis disruption, since the exertions of some sports will obviously create powerful physiological changes. However, sporting activity may also serve as a focusing device, quietening the chattering ego-mind. As the psychiatrist Kostrulaba writes of his own experiences with running, after discussing the universal use of mantras to induce different states of consciousness, “I think the same process occurs in the repetitive rhythm of long-distance running. Eventually, at somewhere between 30 and 40 minutes, the conscious mind gets exhausted and other areas of consciousness are activated” (in Murphy & Whyte, 1995, p. 66). Similarly, the poet Ted Hughes often experienced a meditative state while fishing. He describes the effect of staring at a float for long periods: “All the nagging impulses that are normally distracting your mind dissolve…once they have dissolved, you enter one of the orders of bliss. Your whole being rests lightly on your float, but not drowsily, very alert” (Hughes, 1967, p. 72). Similar explanations can be made for other prominent triggers of spiritual experience, such as music, dance, sex, the contemplation of art, creative work, relaxation and physical activity (Hardy, 1979; Laski, 1961; Wade, 2000).

To further investigate this relationship between an intensification and stilling of life energy and spiritual experiences, it is perhaps useful to look briefly again at the characteristics of spiritual experiences as described above, and examine how intensified and stilled life-energy (or ISLE) states produce them individually.

ISLE states can be seen as producing characteristics 1–3 (and possibly 5 and 6) due to what Deikman (1980) refers to as a ‘de-automatization of perception.’ As he suggests, as adults our perceptions of our surroundings become automatic as an energy and attention saving function. I have elsewhere posited a psychological ‘de-sensitizing mechanism’ (Taylor, 2005a, 2005b) to explain this. This mechanism—related to the process of habituation—‘switches off’ our attention to experiences and environments once we have been exposed to them for a certain amount of time. It turns the world around us to familiarity so that we do not expend our psychic energy in perceiving it. It is necessary because the ego is such a dominant and powerful feature of our psyche that it monopolises our psychic energy. Energy which could potentially be used in perception is ‘diverted’ to the ego. As a result, we perceive the world in a less powerful and immediate way.

But in ISLE states, this process is reversed. As Novak (1996) describes it, when a person meditates she diverts attention away from the automatized structures of consciousness which produce ‘thought-chatter.’ As a result, they begin to weaken and fade away, which ‘frees up’ the psychic energy they normally monopolise. As a result, in Novak’s words “energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defence, fantasy and fear can appear as the delight of present-
centredness” (1996, p. 277). Or, in my terminology, this surplus of psychic energy means that the de-sensitising mechanism is no longer necessary, and naturally falls away, so that we are able to perceive the is-ness and beauty which is normally ‘switched off’ to us.

Characteristic no. 4—a sense of inner well-being—is related to an ISLE state because, as Indian mystical traditions tell us, bliss is the nature of being or consciousness—being-consciousness-bliss (satchitananda) is the essence of reality. We are, therefore, likely to experience this bliss when the energy of our being is intensely concentrated. In addition, as adults we become free of the constant thought-chatter which runs through our minds and creates disturbance. In ISLE states this ‘storm’ fades away. It has to, otherwise life-energy would not be concentrated enough to produce a spiritual state. And this contributes to the sense of well-being which spiritual experiences feature. There is always a sense of inner stillness, and a sense of purity—and this is not so much an affective state, as a direct, literal experience of the stillness and purity of consciousness in these moments.

Characteristic no. 7—a sense of union with the world—is primarily related to ego-dissolution, a transcendence or dismantling of the separate-self system which creates the sense of separateness and duality. This is partly achieved through a silencing of ‘thought chatter.’ Our sense of ego appears to be largely maintained by this chatter. Therefore when the chatter becomes silent, the separate self system may fade away. But at the same time, as many spiritual traditions hold, at the essence of our being we are one with the cosmos. As the Upanishads tells us, atman is one with brahman. The life-energy which constitutes our being is one and the same as the spirit-force which pervades the cosmos. Therefore when we experience a powerful intensification of life-energy we also effectively experience the essence of the whole universe. We tap into the ocean of Spirit which pervades all reality.

Characteristic no. 8, the sense of ‘becoming who we really are’ or of making contact with a deeper and truer part of our own being, may be related to an ISLE state in that life-energy—expressing itself as spirit or pure consciousness—as the essence of our being. The energy is our Self, our true identity, so that an ISLE state equates with a sense of connection to a truer self, especially once the superficial thought-maintained self of the ego has faded away.

Characteristic no. 9—possibly the highest intensity of spiritual experience—can be seen as the optimum state of intensification and stilling of life-energy, the point when the energy of our being becomes completely concentrated and completely stilled. In Washburn’s terminology, this is where we are completely open to the Dynamic Ground. In fact, it is not a question of being open to it, but wholly becoming the Ground. There is no outflow of energy through the ego or through cognitive or perceptual activity at all, but a complete inner accumulation of ‘the powers of the soul.’ At the same time, the ego-mind is completely quiet, completely devoid of thought, bringing a state of complete inner stillness. At this point, reality reveals itself in its purest state.
The Sources of Pre-Egoic Spirituality

This connection between ISLE states and spiritual experience can be utilised to explain childhood spirituality. The primary factor here is children’s less developed ego structure. As well as being a giant ‘leap,’ the development of the ego entails a ‘fall,’ largely due to the new distribution of life-energy which occurs as we enter adulthood. The adult ego creates a massive ‘outflow’ of life-energy–so much so that, at the psychic level, energy has to be ‘diverted’ from other functions, particularly perception. The ego consumes energy both as a structure and through its activity. The structure of the ego requires a great deal of energy to be maintained, in the same way that the physical structures of the body–such as our bones and internal organs–need a constant input of energy to maintain themselves. There must be some input of energy to keep such a powerful structure intact and in place. And in terms of activity, the cognitive activity of the ego in particular creates a significant outflow of energy. This includes the voluntary cognitive activity of rational/logical thought (such as decision making, planning and organising) but more prominently, as we have seen, involuntary ‘thought-chatter.’

Young children experience a constant heightened perception, a sense of the aliveness of phenomena and a sense of meaning and harmony because the desensitising mechanism does not act upon their perceptions. It has not yet developed as a part of their psyche. This mechanism appears to develop in parallel with the ego, becoming fully functional in the mid-to-late teens. Since children do not yet have fully formed egos (Loevinger, 1976; Piaget & Inhelder, 1956), they do not yet need this energy-conserving mechanism. As a result, children look at the world with constant intense, non-automatic perception. They are able to perceive the is-ness, harmony and meaning which are always there but which are usually edited out of our normal adult perception.

In other words, because of their less developed ego structure, children always have a high concentration of life-energy inside them. There is always energy available for them to ‘fuel’ their perceptions, so that these are never automatic. This partly explains their natural happiness too: without the ego channelling away their life-energy, there is–as Washburn (1995) notes–a deep well of life-energy inside them, so that they can constantly experience the well-being which is the nature of this energy. In addition, children may experience well-being because they are largely free of the psychological disturbance which our constant ‘associational chatter’ creates. Although–as Loevinger (1976) highlights–they often suffer emotional disturbances, in general, their mental state could be seen as one of greater inner stillness.

In terms of higher intensity spiritual experiences, if children have a more intense concentration of life-energy inside them, they would only need a small degree of further energy-intensification to reach these higher levels. It is significant that most of the childhood spiritual experiences I have quoted from above occurred when the children were gazing at natural objects or scenes, usually alone. Presumably the quietness and solitude together with the act of concentrating their attention as they gazed had the effect of further intensifying
their life-energy. For example, one experience occurred when the person was “in a quiet reverie...looking at my arm” (Hoffman, 1992, p. 93). Another occurred when the person was alone on a beach, looking at the sky and the sea, and ‘breathing with the waves’ in an almost meditative fashion (Hoffman, p. 38). Another person describes how her childhood mystical experience occurred after she “awoke quietly one morning” while everyone else was asleep, and as she was watching the flight of a bird (p. 38). Other experiences occurred when the child was in a car gazing out at the passing countryside, alone on a farm “concentrating for hours on little square patches of earth” (p. 53), lying on the grass watching a group of ants moving, looking out of the window in an intense state of absorption, and so on. Piechowski (2001) even suggests that some children consciously use methods of focusing their attention as a way of inducing spiritual experiences, as the girl who breathed with the waves and “entered their rhythm” (Hoffman, 1992, p. 30) appears to have done.

It also makes sense that experiences of union with the world should be common in childhood. Since their ego is less developed as a structure, children do not experience the same degree of separation from the world as adults. For them the I/it boundary is less defined. As Werner put it, their perception and cognition is ‘de-differentiated with respect to the distinctions between self and object and between objects’ (1957, p. 152). Or, in Washburn’s words, in early childhood the ego “has only incomplete self-boundaries... no clear line has been drawn, separating the ego from the Dynamic Ground” (1995, p. 24). As a result it is easy for children to access a state of oneness or connectedness with the world, and with individual phenomena.

Since they are free of the energy-monopolising structure of the adult ego, it is perhaps surprising that high intensity spiritual experiences are not even more common in childhood, or that children’s normal state does not include higher level characteristics. However, despite their lack of mental chatter, children’s more intense emotions and desires than adults (Loevinger, 1976) can be seen as creating a significant ‘outflow’ of energy and a large degree of turbulence inside them. This is perhaps why, as I mentioned earlier, children rarely have spiritual experiences of the highest intensity. They can rarely attain the state of complete stillness and inner emptiness – and complete energy-intensification – which makes these experiences possible.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRE- AND TRANS-EGOIC SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

One significant difference between pre and trans-egoic spiritual experiences is that characteristic no. 8—the ‘identity shift’ from the surface ego to a deeper and truer self—also appears to be largely absent from reports of childhood spiritual experiences. However, this is surely inevitable, since the shift which takes place is from the ego to spiritual essence, and with younger children the ego has yet to become the locus of identity (Loevinger, 1976).

Another significant difference is that childhood spiritual experiences do not appear to feature a universal sense of love and compassion, and a bodhisattva-
like desire to relieve the suffering of all living beings (the intense compassion which stems from becoming one with others, as described under characteristic no. 7). This may be because, as the developmental model of interpersonal relations developed by Selman (1971) suggests, it is only around the time of the ‘upper elementary grades’ that children begin to understand multiple perspectives, and are able to see the self from the perspective of others. Childhood spirituality appears generally not to include the empathic world-centric elements of adult spiritual experiences; it is essentially a primal experience of perception, feeling and relationship to nature.

Another difference is that children’s spiritual experiences are very rarely—in Stace’s (1950) term—introvertive. That is, they are rarely experiences of withdrawing from the external world and attaining a state of inner well-being and spaciousness, or—at a higher intensity—a state of inner emptiness or pure consciousness, in which we ‘touch into’ the spiritual essence of all reality. (The two examples given earlier of high intensity childhood spiritual experiences are two rare examples I have found of childhood introvertive spiritual experiences.) Childhood spiritual experiences are almost always extravertive—that is, they are mainly experiences of perception (e.g. perceiving beauty, harmony and alive-ness) and of relationship to the world (e.g. becoming one with nature.) This makes sense when we consider that children live in a constant of extraversion. Their inner selves are not strong, stable or still enough to allow them to ‘turn inward’ and experience the state of sense-withdrawal which gives rise to introvertive experiences.

Furthermore, because of their lack of formal-operational cognition (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956) children are not able to reflect upon or analyse their spiritual experiences. This difference could be extended into an objection to the validity of childhood spiritual experiences. Can these experiences be genuine if children are not actually conscious of them? One might argue that self-awareness is an essential characteristic of spirituality. A truly spiritual state involves being conscious of that state.

However, I do not believe this is a valid argument. Experiences are still real whether we analyse them self-consciously or not. An animal still has the experiences of feeling hungry even if it is not aware of itself feeling hungry. And in any case, childhood spiritual experiences attain a form of retrospective self-consciousness when we recall and analyse them as adults. Even if we were not conscious of them as children, we become conscious of them as adults.

THE ONTOGENETIC FALL AND RISE

In a sense, then, as we become adults and as the ego becomes fully formed, by the time of Loevinger’s ‘conformist’ stage, or Piaget’s ‘formal-operational’ stage, there is a loss of the natural spirituality of children. After describing how “Heaven lies about us in our infancy,” Wordsworth described how “shades of the prison-house begin to close” until eventually the divine vision of childhood disappears: “The Man perceives it die away./And fade into the light of
common day” (Poems, p. 71). Ernest Becker (1973) described this as a process of “repressing” our vision of “the primary miraculousness of creation” until “we have closed it off, changed it, and no longer perceive the world as it is to raw experience” (p. 50).

In psychological terms, this transformation is partly due to the automatization of perception identified by Werner (1957) and Deikman (1980), or the “desensitizing mechanism,” entailing a loss of the perceptual intensity and sense of aliveness and harmony of our childhood state (Taylor, 2005a, 2005b). As this process develops, the world which was once so full of wonder and beauty becomes a more mundane place.

In addition, as the ego structure develops, the boundary between the self and the world becomes stronger. The process of ‘differentiation’ begins, and eventually we find ourselves ‘in here,’ looking out at a world ‘out there,’ so that we experience a basic sense of separateness. As Washburn (1995) describes what he terms the ‘mental-egoic’ phase of development, “The mental ego has withdrawn from interpersonal intimacy and girded itself against intrapsychic spontaneity….it has thereby reduced itself to an insulated and disconnected state” (p. 209).

And now that our psychic energy is largely expended through maintaining the ego as a structure and through its activity, there is less residual life-energy within us, so that we no longer experience a natural state of well-being.

However, let me reiterate that this does not mean that childhood is a ‘higher’ state than adulthood. In no sense do I believe that we need to ‘go back’ to our childhood state, as in Wilber’s ‘retro-romanticism’ (Wilber, 2000). I have already mentioned some of the great benefits conferred through ego development, such as impulse control, abstract/logical thought, conceptual knowledge and the ability to take perspectives. But for these benefits to occur, the energy of the psyche has to be diverted primarily to the ego. This ‘fall’ is an inevitable consequence of the ‘leap’ of ego development.

At the same time, there are aspects of the ego’s development which are not wholly healthy or positive. In a sense, the ego becomes over-developed, too powerful as a structure, with boundaries so strong that they create the sense of sense of duality and separateness described above. In particular, thought-chatter can be seen as a negative ‘quirk’ of the ego, consuming a great deal of energy and creating disturbance. It is almost as if the ego’s self-reflective and cognitive abilities—itself very positive developments–have a dysfunctional aspect. To a large extent, they function autonomously and automatically, without the individual’s volition.

Reconnection

In hierarchical views of spiritual development, spiritual states can seem inaccessible, like the higher reaches of a mountain. They only become readily accessible—both as a state and in terms of frequently experiencing them—once we have moved through other levels of development. But if this theory of the
‘energetic’ sources of spiritual experience is correct, and if the case I have made for the validity of pre-egoic spiritual experience holds true, then spiritual states are a more like a plateau than a mountain, a Divine Ground (or Dynamic Ground, in Washburn’s terminology) which we are immersed in from birth to childhood, but which we may become alienated from as the ego structure develops.

In my view, it is sensible to see transpersonal development as a process of recapturing the natural spirituality of childhood—and going beyond it, into higher transpersonal states—at the same time as retaining the intellectual, volitional, self-reflective and organisational abilities the ego has given us. Childhood can be seen as a state of immature spirituality, while a mature spiritual state incorporates and integrates the positive aspects of ego development. As Washburn (2003) puts it, transpersonal development is a spiral, not a ladder.

This development can be achieved through a ‘re-structuring’ of our psyche, bringing about a re-distribution of psychic energy. Because of its dysfunctional aspects, the ego consumes much more energy than is necessary. But these dysfunctional aspects can be healed, so that the energy they conserve can be retained, and the disturbance they create can be stilled. The ego can become less dominant and more integrated as a structure, without sacrificing any developmental benefits.

In fact, this can be seen as the main aim of spiritual practices such as meditation, mindfulness, service or devotion: to make the ego less dominant, to soften its boundaries and quieten its incessant thought-chatter. As a result, we can permanently ‘free up’ the psychic energy which it normally consumes. This becomes residual life-energy which permanently re-energises our perceptions and enables us to experience a natural well-being. Or in Washburn’s (1995) terms, we reconnect with the deeper psyche—or Dynamic Ground—and its powerful energies.

Meditation in particular works towards this end. As we have seen, both Deikman (1980) and Novak (1996) have noted the ‘energy-conserving’ effect of meditation, bringing a ‘de-automatization of perception.’ It is important to note that meditation has both temporary and cumulative long term effects. As Deikman’s ‘experimental meditation’ sessions indicated, after meditation sessions individuals are likely to become more sensitive to the ‘is-ness’ and beauty of their surroundings (Deikman, 1966). Under normal circumstances, however, these effects diminish quickly, as the normal structure of the ego reforms. This is why most spiritual experiences are only temporary. However, through sustained meditation practice, the structure of the ego can become permanently altered. Its boundaries become gradually softer; its involuntary thought-chatter becomes gradually quieter. As a result, we gradually build up a greater intensification of life-energy which generates spiritual characteristics such as perceptual intensity and well-being. In addition, the ‘softening’ of ego-boundaries leads to a new sense of connection to the world, together with a new integration with the body and greater powers of empathy towards other
human beings, and other species. At the same time, the quietening of thought-
chatter brings a new sense of inner stillness, and a new sense of identity. This is
part of the reason why meditation is so powerful, and so essential, as a spiritual
practice.

At the same time, it is important to remember that meditation is not the only
possible approach. As I have shown above, activities such as sport, communion
with nature, music, dance, sex or creative activity can also produce spiritual
experiences, by generating ISLE states. These activities can also have a long term
spiritual effect, and can even be used as conscious spiritual practice (in addition to
their other purposes), as a way of gradually altering the structure of the ego and
creating a new distribution of life-energy. In fact, such activities are important to
ensure that spiritual development does not become separate from other aspects of
life, or from other human beings or the body itself. This accords with Wilber’s
notion of integral development (Wilber, 2000) and Ferrer’s concepts of

When this mature spiritual state becomes permanent, we combine the intense
perceptual awareness of childhood with the conceptual awareness of
adulthood; we combine natural pre-egoic spiritual experience with the
cognitive, organisational and processing abilities conferred by the ego. This
is the point where we become truly integrated human beings.

Note

1 Childhood spiritual experiences are incidentally one of the strongest arguments against the ‘deconstructionist’
view of mystical experiences put forward by scholars such as Katz (1983). As Katz sees it, mystical experiences
always appear in the context of religious traditions, and are always formed and determined in content by those
traditions. He claims that the notion of a ‘perennial philosophy’ does not take into account these differences. In
his view, the mystical experience of a Buddhist and a Jewish mystic will always be fundamentally dissimilar, so
that there is no such thing as a ‘mystical experience’ per se. However, the fact that mystical experiences can
happen to very young children who have not absorbed any religious teaching—and are too young to understand it
even if they have—argues strongly against this. Another strong argument against Katz’s position is that mystical
experiences happen to people who have no background—or interest—in religion.

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