

THE BODY IN NEW AGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SUBTLE BODY: THE EXAMPLE OF THE SOURCE BREATHWORK COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the perception of the body among Source Breathwork practitioners. Source Process and Breathwork can be classified as a New Age healing practice that aims to heal the person as a whole. There is also a specific emphasis on healing birth trauma, which is understood as healing the fundamental experience of an individual's life. The body in New Age can be described with the notion of the 'subtle body', a non-dualistic approach to the body that blurs the boundaries between 'matter' and 'spirit'. Subtle bodies, the 'places' where healing occurs, are considered energetic, invisible and nebulous. The concept of the subtle body as a scholarly tool is applied in the analysis of fieldwork data collected between 2011 and 2013 in Estonia. In a Source community, the body is considered to be energetic and to include chakras. Members of the community claim that the functioning of the body and well-being in life bear upon negative and positive thoughts or decisions that are held in the subconscious and embedded at a cellular level in the body. Moreover, the breathwork practitioners believe that an individual already makes fundamental decisions about life in the womb or during birth. Since the perception of the body and birth are closely interrelated in the Source community, the meaning of birth is viewed from the perspective of the subtle body.

KEYWORDS: subtle body • energy • breathing • birth • healing

INTRODUCTION

One of the first anthropologists to describe techniques of the body was Marcel Mauss (1973 [1935]). He defined these techniques as "the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies" (ibid.: 70). Although in the contemporary study of the humanities and social sciences considering the body and bodily practices as more than just biological or physiological is as common as the understanding of the body's naturalness, the significance of Mauss' work lies in its emphasis on the process of learning and the role of socio-cultural context in acquiring techniques of the body. Giving the examples of Taoist and Yogic breathing techniques and affirming that similar techniques are more widespread than in China and India alone, Mauss encouraged researchers to

study breathing techniques as bodily techniques from the socio-cultural perspective (*ibid.*: 86–87). Indeed, practicing a breathing technique also means adopting an ideology, adopting beliefs and understandings relating to the body and its interaction with the world. Because they have been part of different religious/spiritual practices and have been relatively easily accessed, breathing techniques have gained wider popularity among people in Europe and the US since the 1960s and 1970s. Strongly intertwined with the body, embodiment, and bodily experiences, one of these breathing techniques is Source Process and Breathwork, which is the focus of this paper.

Source Process and Breathwork (hereafter Source Breathwork) can be classified as a New Age¹ healing practice that pays equal attention to the physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual aspects of the human experience. Source Breathwork has been developed from a similar practice called Rebirthing, which was ‘invented’ by an American, Leonard Orr, in the 1960s and 1970s, since when a network of Source Breathwork practitioners has gathered around the founder of the practice, Binnie A. Dansby.² Born in 1939 in the US, Dansby began to focus on spiritual self-development and healing practices during the 1970s. For more than 30 years Dansby has been engaged in breathwork and healing birth trauma, and has developed the philosophy and methodology of Source Breathwork. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Source Breathwork training and seminars have regularly taken place in Estonia. As a result, a local Source community³ has emerged. During the breathwork sessions, a practitioner breathes rhythmically connecting inhalation and exhalation. Practitioners claim to have bodily, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experiences, which have a central role in self-development and personal healing, i.e. bringing transformation and well-being to the practitioners’ lives.

The New Age milieu is characterised by a rich array of healing practices that often come and go. However, what makes Source Breathwork remarkable and a fascinating phenomenon to study is its emphasis on birth and healing birth trauma. According to Source Breathwork teachings, birth is seen as one of the most fundamental experiences, the ‘source experience’ and has an immense influence on a person’s consequent life. Practitioners frequently claim they re-experience, and, hence, remember, their physical birth, as well as post- and prenatal periods, during a breathing session. Members of the community think that birth can be a traumatic experience for both mother and new-born and so it needs to be healed. Moreover, to change the world, improve the well-being of subsequent generations and offer women an opportunity to giving birth in an ‘alternative’, ‘ecstatic’ and ‘gentle way’, Dansby also pays much attention to childbirth practices and to the environment in which a baby is born. Thus, the practice of Source Breathwork is not just a breathing technique and it is not just about personal healing and self-development. I believe it can also have a significant social influence. As the women at Source community emphasise, by following their intuition and listening to their bodies during pregnancy they might, for example, refuse generally accepted medical procedures if they feel no need for them. They might prefer home births to hospitals, in a situation where the former is still not clearly regulated by law in Estonia. The expectations, needs and views on birth can be remarkably different from those which medical discourse advocates. Hence, contradictions and misunderstandings between Source Breathwork practitioners and medical workers may occur.

One of the factors that generate contradictions between the two discourses – the religious/spiritual and medical – is perception of the human body. Representing the scien-

tific-rationalist understanding of the world, contemporary medicine considers the body biological and physiological, and a locus of chemical processes. However, the body in New Age can be described with the notion of the 'subtle body', a non-dualistic approach to the body that blurs the boundaries between 'matter' and 'spirit'. The concept of subtle body is particularly useful in order to understand the functioning of the world and the self in terms of holism, which is one of the main characteristics of New Age thought. Subtle bodies, also known for example in Hindu and Buddhist religious practice, Western esoteric philosophical and religious traditions as well as in shamanism, are seen as nebulous, energetic and invisible (Barcan, Johnston 2005; Johnston 2010). It is believed that healing primarily takes place in the subtle body, not in the physical one. Using the term 'subtle body' as a scholarly term, the aim of this paper is to describe and analyse the concept of body in the Source Breathwork community. My analysis is mainly based on the work of Jay Johnston and Ruth Barcan – researchers from the discipline of Cultural Studies. As alternative healing practices have gained more attention in the study of medical and social sciences as sociological, ethical, legal and medical phenomena, Johnston and Barcan encourage study of these health therapies from the cultural as well as historical point of view. Setting their study in a philosophical and discursive framework, they have analysed alternative health therapies and New Age thought from the perspective of the subtle body model (Barcan, Johnston 2005; Johnston, Barcan 2006; Johnston 2010; see also Johnston 2008).

Motivated by Johnston and Barcan and drawing on fieldwork materials collected between 2011 and 2013, the main research questions of this article are: how is the body constructed in the Source community; and how can the importance of birth be explained with the help of the subtle body concept? During the 2011–2013 period, I conducted participant observation in breathing groups, seminars, and Source community training. I have also interviewed members of the community and regular practitioners of breathwork. The article relies on 20 semi- and less structured interviews, as well as fieldwork notes.

My aim in the first section is to introduce the term 'subtle body' as a scholarly tool and a non-dualistic conception of the body. Examples of subtle bodies will give insight to the richness of this particular type of body and also provide more extended context for the next section. The second section deals with analysis of the fieldwork data. Relying on the concept of the subtle body and focusing on narratives of birth and breathing experiences, I will outline the main aspects of the construction of the body in the Source Breathwork community. In the conclusion, I will explain with the help of the subtle body model, why Source practitioners consider birth so important.

BODY VERSUS MIND?

In Western thought, the body is often considered something natural, unchangeable and passive that belongs to the realm of biological and medical study. However, it would be inadequate to ignore the cultural, social and historical contexts when analysing the body (Grosz 1994: x), since the boundaries of the 'Western self' have been historically constructed, including philosophical and religious assumptions (von Stuckrad 2005: 136). Western philosophy has been much influenced by dualism, a belief that the world

is composed of two exclusive substances – the physical and the spiritual. Dualism separates mind from body and thus divides man into two opposite parts. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz claims that the body-mind dichotomy produces two hierarchical terms, with the mind the privileged and the body the subordinate term. To establish its borders and identity, the privileged term marginalises the subordinated term making it negative or invisible. Hence, the body becomes clearly distinct from, as well as the underling to, the mind. (Grosz 1994: 3)

Plato (427–347 BC) wrote about the body-mind duality early on in Western philosophical history. Plato was convinced that the soul is the ‘true’ and ‘real’ part of Man, which is imprisoned by the body (Stuckrad 2005: 14). Christian tradition continues the principle of duality, saying that the immortal soul is given by God, while the mortal body belongs to the human world (Grosz 1994: 5). René Descartes (1596–1650), who sharply separated the soul from nature, believed that the body alone could be considered a part of nature, whereas the mind or the soul has no place in the natural world. Body, an ‘extended substance’, is seen as a mechanical device that functions according to the laws of nature and is subordinate to the mind, the ‘thinking substance’ (ibid.: 6). As man is first and foremost a thinking being, Descartes concluded that what we intimately know is *not our bodies* but the structure of our minds (for example, the nature of our rationality) (Johnson 1987: xxvi). This means the higher truth can be found when studying the mind. The body becomes secondary, is naturalised and left to the scrutiny of the natural sciences.

Cartesian dualism has had immense influence on the scientific-rationalist conception of the world. The body is understood as profoundly secular, physical and physiological; it is the place of biological-chemical processes. New Age healing practices that have gained popularity during the 20th century, however, see the body differently: it is dynamic and crosses the borders of matter and mind, physical and metaphysical, sacral and secular. Healing practices give attention to the interaction between the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of human experience, as well as to social factors that influence the living environment (Hanegraaff 1996: 43). This particular emphasis on the interaction between the different spheres of life is based on the concept of holism, which sees the body-mind and the man-universe as a whole. It is difficult to combine holistic New Age thought with dualism, as New Age believers do not consider the physical body as a ‘prison’ of the soul nor a ‘substance’ that is radically distinguished by the mind (ibid.: 222). Although, New Age has its roots in the Western counter-culture of the 1960s, and at the same time represents a phenomenon of the postmodern consumer society, Wouter Hanegraaff has emphasised that its fundamental ideas can be traced back to distant history. New Age can be seen as the contemporary manifestation of what is called Western esotericism. (Hanegraaff 2009 [2002]: 340) Furthermore, the perceptions of the body in New Age can also be understood as manifestations and complex combinations of esoteric traditions.

In addition to the physical body, there is another ‘body’ – the subtle body – which gains focus among New Age practitioners. Drawing on Jay Johnston (2010), subtle bodies have been variously conceptualised in Eastern, Western and esoteric philosophical and religious traditions as well as different indigenous⁴ and shamanic cultures. However, all these ‘bodies’ are seen as ontologically energetic, nebulous and invisible. Moreover, it is believed that instead of the physical body, the subtle body is the place where true

healing comes about. In contrast to dualism, subtle bodies represent blurred boundaries between 'matter' and 'spirit', so that it is impossible to separate pure spirit and pure matter. In this sense, as Johnston says, subtle bodies disrupt the type of binary logic that sharply distinguishes the physical from the metaphysical, matter from consciousness, the self from the divine or I from Other. Subtle bodies are believed to be comprised of energetic 'substance', in which the physical body and the spirit (or metaphysical agency) interpenetrate one another. Johnston (2010: 69–73) concludes that, from this perspective, the subtle body can be understood as an embodied interface between the religious/spiritual and biological. In other words, the subtle body is the bridge between the physical and the metaphysical worlds (Hanegraaff 1996: 222). So, the concept of the body and the way it is perceived in New Age originates from a philosophical system that is different to dualism.

It is necessary to clarify that, on the one hand, the concrete term 'subtle body' is a vernacular category which one finds in different New Age or esoteric books and encounters in terminology used by the practitioners; but on the other hand, the subtle body may be seen as a model of a particular type of body and used as a scholarly tool (for example, Barcan, Johnston 2005; Johnston, Barcan 2006; Barcan 2010; Johnston 2010). So the term has both emic and etic usages. Considering the subtle body a scholarly tool, it is firstly possible to distinguish a descriptive category that answers to the question of how the subtle body is conceptualised in different religious and philosophical traditions. Secondly, the model of the subtle body can be used as an analytical category, which helps us to understand different discourses of the body and the ways people perceive themselves and are related to others. Moreover, this helps us to find the meanings of, and reasons for, socio-cultural changes that are in interaction with the perceptions of human body.

As for the descriptive category in general, according to Johnston, one can divide the model of subtle body into two types. These two types can exist separately as well as together, in combination with each other. The first type comprises different energetic sheaths or 'bodies' that extend beyond the physical body. These 'bodies' interpenetrate and exceed each other and the physical body. (Johnston 2010: 70) The example of this type of subtle body can be found in the works introduced by the Swiss physician, alchemist and astrologer Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim) in the 15th and 16th centuries, and it still is found in the contemporary New Age milieu (ibid.). Paracelsus claimed that everything visible – minerals, plants, animals and men – have "their invisible counterparts in the macrocosm, where they exist as 'astra', which represent their essence" (Benzenhöfer, Gantenbein 2006: 927). As a consequence, he was convinced that a man consists of the visible and the invisible body, and the latter is closely related with stars which influence the physical body and its condition (ibid.: 923; also see Christie 1998). In addition, the Modern Theosophical Society founded in 19th century by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and her companions, has carried the ideas of subtle bodies to New Age belief and practices (Johnston 2010: 70). Similarly to Paracelsus' ideas, theosophical teachings claim that the microcosm of a man corresponds to the macrocosm of universe. Man and earth have seven bodies,⁵ of which the only visible body is the physical one that has the highest consistency of matter (Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 15). The rest of the energetic 'bodies' are comprised of both matter and consciousness (or spirit) to various degrees (Johnston 2010: 70). Accord-

ing to Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, in her *Secret Doctrine* (1888) Blavatsky found that the higher purpose of a man is to reach the three last levels – *Manas*, *Buddhi*, *Atma* – of embodiment with the help of reincarnation. Once people succeed, mankind will be like gods. (Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 15–17; see also Goodrick-Clarke 2008)

The second type of subtle body is called esoteric anatomy. It is believed that organs in the physical body have energetic subtle matter counterparts and/or the body has internal pathways of subtle energy (Johnston 2010: 70). For example, belief in the existence of chakras, the centres of energy that are located in the human body on the subtle level, represent the attributes of the second type of subtle body. Having an Indian background, the term ‘chakra’ and its interpretations have been successfully adapted by New Age believers with the help of so-called esoteric spokespersons of the 19th and 20th centuries (see also Hammer 2001: 91–97, 181–197). Although the number can vary, often seven charkas are depicted aligning up the spine to the top of the head. Every chakra corresponds to and influences the functioning of certain organs in the physical body. Furthermore, blockages of energy flow in the chakras are considered to influence all spheres of life: the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, etc. Another example of the second type of subtle body can be found in the teachings of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) that have entered the New Age milieu. As Johnston has noted, *qi* (or *chi*) – a life force or vital energy – flows along the internal pathways of the body and connects the individual self with the cosmos. Since the organs of the body are considered to be energetic and not anatomic, the aim of TCM practitioners is to regulate, or redirect *qi* through the physical body and simultaneously use it to heal. (Johnston 2010: 75–76)

As mentioned above, the model of the subtle body can also be applied as an analytical category. The contemporary world is characterised by different co-existent discourses on the body in which the subtle body can be seen as one among others. Being the bridge between the physical and the metaphysical world, the subtle body enables us to understand the concept of the self from the perspective of holism, leading to the New Age belief that ‘we are all one’ or ‘we are all connected’. When considering an individual as comprised of a subtle body, the perception of the self becomes inherently extensive, open and multiple, i.e. being “a stark contrast to the bounded singular subject of modernity” (Barcan, Johnston 2005: 73). The individual is intimately interrelated with the environment and other people as the boundaries of the self extend beyond the corporeal boundaries (Johnston, Barcan 2006: 34). This type of body has also been described with the theoretical concept of the ‘open body’, which represents in contrast to the ‘closed body’ magical and pre- and early modern perceptions of the body. As boundaries between the self and the outside world are less distinct, the open body is “considered more vulnerable to intrusion from the outside” (Stark 2006: 154). The latter is also characteristic to the subtle body. In the New Age worldview the individual becomes extremely sensitive to the environment so that every minor change in the macrocosm can have an influence on the body and mind. At the same time an individual is perceived as profoundly independent with the power to transform the environment. Thus, New Age belief is that one’s thoughts can have an impact on personal relationships, change society and the condition of planet Earth and so on. From the perspective of the subtle body the self is open to the environment and is able to draw forth changes in the world.

As Ruth Barcan and Jay Johnston have noted, New Age practitioners are often sceptical about modern medicine and scientific-rationalist conceptions of the body. Instead, as mentioned above, the spiritual and/or magical understandings are being revived and refashioned (Barcan, Johnston 2005: 73). When challenging scientific-rationalist models of the body (*ibid.*), the subtle body helps to explain the contradictions between orthodox medicine and alternative (or vernacular) medicine. The concept of subtle body gives a more exhaustive meaning to emic terms like 'illness' and 'health'. Taking the model of the subtle body and the extensiveness, openness and multiplicity of the self into consideration, it becomes explicit why New Age practitioners, in contrast to practitioners of orthodox medicine, view illness, according to Hanegraaff, as a disruption of balance that causes dissonances in all realms of life; or why good health, in addition to physical condition, also means general harmony and well-being (1996: 42–47).

New Age believers can be familiar with various models of the subtle body as they are frequently engaged in several practices. When talking about different practices, practitioners express themselves diversely using compatible vocabulary. The term 'subtle body' does not belong to the basic terminology of Source Breathwork teachings, and neither do practitioners usually use the term when talking about breathwork. However, the way the body is perceived emanates from the concept of the subtle body. Generally in the teachings of Source Breathwork, the body is understood according to the second type of subtle body. Although, as already mentioned, two types of subtle body can be combined. The same may occur in the Source community at the individual level. Giving an outline of core beliefs of Source Breathwork, I aim to introduce and analyse the perception of the body in the community. In Source community, the body is considered energetic and comprised of chakras. Members of the community claim that the functioning of the body and well-being in life (i.e. a person's health) are interrelated with negative and positive thoughts or decisions that are "held as unconscious beliefs" (Dansby 2012c) and are embedded on a cellular level in the body. Healing particularly takes place in the subconscious and/or in the cells. As the body is seen as energetic, I argue that terms like 'cellular memory' (or 'body memory') and 'the subconscious', used by Source practitioners, should be primarily looked at from the perspective of the subtle body.

THOUGHTS, ENERGY AND THE BODY

New Age beliefs and practices have been characterised as eclectic, heterogeneous and flexible, easily integrating various ideas. Practitioners are encouraged to interpret and combine religious and philosophical teachings from different cultures and periods. Moreover, although conventional science can be viewed negatively, selected pieces of scientific discourse have found their way to New Age doctrines (Hammer 2001: 204). Scientific concepts are often adjusted to religious symbols (Lewis 2007: 210). As science develops, the vocabulary of New Age teachings and modes of expression are also constantly being renewed, complemented and reinterpreted.⁶ Thus, New Age teachings as a whole are relatively dynamic and rich in different concepts and interpretations. Although Binnie A. Dansby has written the teachings of Source Breathwork, practitioners interpret them according to their own experiences, as personal experience is valued highly. Despite the fact that birth and healing birth trauma comprise the core of Dans-

by's teachings, this does not mean that all Source practitioners consider birth equally important. Instead of birth as the 'source experience', the experience that is believed to have fundamental influence on a person's life can lie, for example, in childhood.

As the focus of this article is also on birth, I will present part of a longer birth narrative told by a Source Breathwork practitioner, Silje,⁷ to provide a more delineated background for the analysis. Silje has been engaged in breathwork since 2001 and claims to have been healing birth trauma ever since. I have chosen this narrative as it points out fundamental aspects of the practice and philosophy. Furthermore, the narrative is characteristic of the way Source practitioners describe their birth experience and relate it to their lives. Silje, similarly to the other practitioners, claims that her birth experience has been reconstructed with the help of breathwork sessions that have made her remember her birth. She has also gathered information from her mother about the birth.

OK, finally I am born. I am content with myself. I have a perfect body, I am perfect. But the first breath that I take in that cold room – I have a feeling like my body explodes. It seemed I lost everything as they immediately cut my umbilical cord. The doctors and the midwife are anxious and in panic. They look after my body. They pull me straight [on the table] covered with oilcloth. I felt it, I have the memory of the oilcloth that I could feel with my back. They put a [name]tag around my leg, I have that memory. Then they clean my mouth and everything else, at the same time they're frightened and anxious. But what about me? It's distasteful, painful and so inconvenient. You know, if you have a terrible headache, the headache is just a slight sensation that reminds me of the explosiveness of the first breath. Literally I had oxygen poisoning: this is again my memory and I have released that memory. The first inhale provided me with oxygen of three to five times more than I actually needed. [...] What then happened? My mother, whom I loved and love so much, I came here only for her, to make her and my father happy. Although, entering the body is like a thunderclap or lightning. Actually, the Light, in other words God or the Spirit, came into the body – that is the way I experience the birth. But it all happened so quickly. Basically in a second my body had to adjust to all these changes. As everything was so intense, I wasn't encouraged to take the next breath. But I had to do it... well OK, I chose to do it. [...] And then I was swaddled. But the body, or to be exact, the mind and the consciousness is used to feeling mother's body, which is alive, and receiving information and sensing Life through her body. This gives me the signal that I'm alive and my mother is alive. But now I'm under the plastic dome and when my consciousness perceives it, then I get feedback that the dome is not alive and it means I'm also not alive. My body is not alive because my mother is gone, the one who represents Life. And my mother is dead [...], and I had the thought that I had killed my mother. But OK. I have the memory that till the moment when I was in the same room with my mother, then it was OK. Then it was like an adventure, the adventure of birth, the adventure of entering the body. But when I was taken away from that room, then the trauma began. Then all this turned into [birth] trauma because it seemed so final. When I took my first breath, the only thought, the only verbal thought that I had was that my father has abandoned me. I think it was God the Father that I experienced. I experienced that my creator had abandoned me, as well as my real father in the physical sense. They both are actually the same for a child. The immense grief and

despair [that I felt]... and then [in this situation] the thoughts that come to your mind and the decisions that you make. Firstly, "I am dead", "I am in the body, and I am dead", "my mother is dead". And [secondly,] "if I express my love and passion, then it is deadly". It is fatal, isn't it? [Another thought was] "My body hurts" and for me the fundamental thought was: "I have no influence", the experience of being pointless. In one word, you can even say, the body comes to be comprised of a kind of lethargic layer. These were the decisions that I made according to the condition of the environment. From this perspective I didn't have any opportunity to make different decisions, but still these were my decisions [which affected my life]. Now I can say that even if I knew how it is going to work out, I never considered that these decisions could have such a distractive influence on my life. I was distracted by these birth experiences for 37 or 38 years, but some people are distracted even for their whole life. [...] Everything that happened after the birth, the following three days, and everything that happened during the birth creates my life pattern. (Silje, 48 years old, interview 2013)⁸

The understanding that a person can remember his/her birth relies on the principle that a baby is already 'conscious' in the womb and during birth. This means a new-born, and even an embryo, is an intellectual being that is able to make, according to the surrounding environment, decisions that have an impact on a person's future life. Decisions can be positive, for example, "I am loved and connected with everything", or similarly to the extract above, negative, for example, "I am dangerous", "I do not deserve love". These negative decisions are called 'self-limiting' decisions and are believed to be the "foundation for our negative patterns and form the core of all human conflict" (Dansby 2012c). According to Source Breathwork teachings due to self-limiting decisions a person stops breathing deeply and expansively, which causes tensions and blockages in the flow of energy. Blockages of energy eventually result in illnesses, in the sense that the balance of different realms of life, i.e. physical, mental, social etc., is disrupted. In short, negative patterns of thought are believed to hinder the flow of energy.

Although I had done so many different things and lived such an interesting life, from time to time I suffered from very deep and long periods of depression. Now I have understood and seen where it all came from. Already before my birth I made a decision that I had done something wrong. Altogether, I even didn't want to born and that was the source of all of my problems: I thought I had chosen the wrong profession, you see, I don't work as a doctor, but why then did I study at university for seven years to become a doctor? Then I thought I am married to the wrong man: he's a politician and he's not on the same wavelength as I am. There were so many things that were wrong in my life. But this pattern repeats itself over and over again in your life until you get rid of the pattern in your subconscious, and my negative pattern of thought was that I had done something wrong. There was a thought in my subconscious that I repeated: you are doing wrong, you are doing wrong, you are doing wrong; you should do something else. These negative thoughts block the energy. The moment after I had worked with the topic related to my father and my birth, the energy was unblocked, on that Monday [after the breathwork training]. Then I understood what it means to live without the blockages, you'll have so much energy. Actually I have inherited an enormous amount of energy from birth. (Linda, 63 years old, 2012 interview)

Practitioners say that these blockages in the flow of energy occur in the chakras, the centres of energy. Chakra systems vary in different religious and philosophical traditions, even in the New Age milieu.⁹ Members of the Source Breathwork community rely on a system that is comprised of seven or eight chakras¹⁰ aligning from the bottom of spine to the top of the head. Every chakra is related to a colour, theme, decision, thought and a body organ or part of the body that is regulated by the functioning of that chakra (see also Dansby 2012b).

[E]very chakra has its own theme and its [energetic] blockages that are embedded in the chakras. The throat is connected with communication. Thoughts like “my self-expression is not welcomed, I cannot express myself” [are connected with the throat chakra]. It is interesting to see, how people share [their thoughts] on Binnie’s training in big groups. Some people stand up when their third training session is ending and say: “It is first time for me to stand up and say something as now I have found enough courage.” The more you do it [share in a group], the more safe it becomes. But at first when you stand up, your face becomes red, you want to sit down at once. Actually this is caused by the patterns in the throat chakra that need to be released, [...] they aren’t serving us anymore. (Kairi, 23 years old, interview 2011)

As it is believed that a person can make his/her first decision about life in the womb or during birth, the proper functioning of the chakras, i.e. the free flow of energy, can already be interfered during the process of birth. A traumatic birth blocks the energy flow in the chakras and chakras will be ‘closed’.

If you have seen yourself as a foetus and the moment when you’re being born – and during the breathing session I have experienced it all – then there’s no doubt the birth is a high spot for a child. And indeed, birth is the moment where one makes a decision about life. If a baby is born, let’s say, in an artificial environment, in a hospital: unfamiliar hands in rubber gloves, then the umbilical cord is cut very fast. He/she decides that life is hell, it’s a shock! And he/she doesn’t want it anymore. He/she closes all the chakras, primarily the heart chakra. Then afterwards for the whole life people take courses to open the chakras again. (Linda, 63 years old, 2012 interview)

The extracts above exemplify that birth is considered extremely important and influential. The problems a person encounters in his or her life can originate from birth. Drawing on Silje’s and Linda’s interviews, the process of birth is described as a remarkable physical effort for a new-born. Moreover, the environment that surrounds a new-born during or after birth can have a traumatic impact on the baby as well. Although birth is inseparably related to the physical realm and physical bodies, the members of the Source community are convinced that the meaning which is given to birth foremost influences life, as well as the condition of the physical body. Thus, illness primarily begins from the mental level due to the negative decisions that block the flow of energy in the chakras. When approaching the body from the perspective of the subtle body, energy becomes one of the key concepts. As birth in the Source community is conceptualised in terms of an intertwining of energy, thoughts and body, the relationship between them needs further scrutiny.

In New Age philosophy, energy “is understood to be a constitutive element of mind and the physical body, as well as to exceed the corporeal self into the ‘space’ between self, other and world” (Johnston, Barcan 2006: 29). Similarly to other New Age practices, energy and thought are closely intertwined in the Source Breathwork community. Energy itself is considered neither good nor bad, it is something that exists and connects everybody and everything. However, interpretations of energy, i.e. how people think about energy, can be positive or negative. For instance, breathwork practitioners often claim that if a person feels fear or pain in the body, it is just an expression and interpretation of energy. When thinking about pain or fear, in other words energy, in a negative way, these feelings and emotions increase in the body as they are emphasised in the mind. Thus, thoughts in combination with energy create the experience of one’s body. To illustrate the priority and inseparable connectedness of the body, thoughts and energy, the argument that the “body is condensed thought” (Silje, 48 years old, interview 2013) is highly relevant. Moreover, the idea of the intertwining of body, thoughts and energy explains the fundamental New Age belief “I am God”, “I create my own reality”, “what I think that I am”. In the Source community it is emphasised that every person has a choice: how to think about, channel, and apply the energy usefully. To utilise energy in a ‘life-supporting’ way, affirmations – i.e. positive sentences widely used in the New Age milieu – are recited and repeated deep in thought by the Source practitioners during breathing sessions as well as in everyday life. Because affirmations are believed to help re-interpret the decisions made during birth, transformation, one of the most characteristic pillars of New Age thought (see also Lewis 1992: 6–7; Johnston, Barcan 2006: 26), is followed by the practitioners.

[T]here’s no point in just re-experiencing a trauma, the purpose [of breathwork sessions] is to change. Extremely powerful changes take place in annual water-sessions in spring. There’s a guy, Steen,¹¹ from Sweden, who is the owner of the pool, and he is very experienced with working in water sessions. [...] [W]hen a person is breathing and is re-experiencing a trauma, then he raises [the person out of water] and says: “Look around! Is your body safe [reference to the affirmation]?”¹² Look at the people who are with you.” [The practitioner] has to change the negative thoughts [to positive] right away, has to continue with breathing. [...] The whole idea is to use the energy to change our unconscious thoughts. So that the thoughts become supportive... not limit life or nurture negativity. (Jana, 41 years old, interview 2011)

As I have shown so far, energy is inseparably connected with the body and mind. Changing one’s thoughts entails transformation in the physical body and other realms of life, i.e. the process of healing is activated. However, some questions remain. Although a baby is believed to be ‘conscious’ during birth, what is the explanation for remembering one’s own birth? How is access to, and healing of, unconscious thoughts and decisions explained?

The interview made by Linda directs us closer to the answers. In the first extract of her interview, Linda claims that there was a life-limiting thought in her subconscious that repeated itself as a pattern in her life. Thanks to breathing sessions she was able to change the thought, which resulted in re-establishing a free flow of energy in her body (cf. also the extract of Jana’s interview). The subconscious is the ‘place’ where all

thoughts, decision and memories that create human experience are held. It has to be emphasised that the concept of the subconscious should be looked at from the perspective of the subtle body model. As illnesses are believed to originate from the level of the mind, they need to be healed at the same level. Using the energy, the subconscious is the 'place' where thoughts can be changed, memories re-experienced and finally a person healed. As breathing itself is simultaneously understood as a physical and metaphysical activity, the access to the subconscious is primarily gained through breathwork sessions.

[B]asically, from the first inhalations and exhalations you will be immediately connected with the space of your subconscious. Well... subconscious... nobody actually knows where it is situated. I don't remember if it was Binnie or somebody else who said that the subconscious is our body and our life story, the story of our current life. (Toomas, 50 years old, interview 2011)

Another important aspect that needs to be mentioned is the understanding that the 'subconscious is our body'. This takes us a step forward to the point where we consider that the subconscious is not just a mental field somewhere, but is embedded in and more strongly related to the body. This is the same way that practitioners talk about the subconscious and changing unconscious thoughts or realising past memories, setting free the old patterns of cellular or body memory.

[T]he aspect that distinguishes Binnie's teachings from other teachings is that Binnie focuses on the human body and bringing the spirit to body and cells. [...] Coming back to yourself and even more, coming to your body and releasing patterns of cellular memory – that is what Binnie teaches. Binnie's aim is to release old patterns and replace them with new thoughts or new impulses, because the quality of life improves when I'm replacing old with new. [...] For me, Binnie's method means working with body memory. (Kairi, 23 years old, interview 2011)

The function of cells is similar to the function of the subconscious. When a baby is born the experience of the birth is retained in the cells, as Dansby states: "We remember our gestation and birth in every cell of our Being" (2012c). Basically, it can be said that both cellular memory and the subconscious are equivalent: a breathing sessions gives access to the decisions, including the memories, that are stored in the cells. When changing the cells' patterns during the session, it is believed healing takes place at deepest levels of the human body. Drawing on James Lewis, I noted at the beginning of this section that in New Age, scientific concepts are often adjusted to become religious symbols. The vocabulary of New Age teachings is often influenced by scientific terminology and rhetoric, which have an important role in legitimating the teachings and in gaining authority (Lewis 2007: 220).¹³ Instead of talking about the subconscious only, in the age of cell biology and genetic engineering it is more relevant and modern to include the concepts of cells and cellular memory in Source Breathwork teaching. However, here again one must keep in mind that cells are not understood just as part of the biological and physical body. Cells should be seen as comprised of energetic matter and therefore belonging to the realm of the subtle body. The functioning of the cells is believed to be directed by thoughts and decisions, in short, by energy that in turn connects a person with his or her surrounding environment (see also Dansby 2012b).

However, what is the role of the physical body when thoughts, decisions, memories and past experiences are believed to direct a person's life? Firstly, as breathing is a mode for reaching directly through the physical body to the subtle levels, the physical body becomes a tool that paves the way to inner and concealed levels of a human being. Secondly, it can be noted that the physical body becomes like a mirror that reflects what is happening at the level of the mind, for example as Linda claims: "The body initiates nothing, body is the final stage. [The illness] starts at the mental level [...] and then heads for the physical level manifesting itself in pains and pathologies." (Linda, 63 years old, 2012 interview) The emergence of illness is like a signal informing a person to change his or her life and thoughts. So, the body becomes a "knowing organism" (Barcan 2009: 221) that holds valuable knowledge for practitioners. Thirdly, Source practitioners emphasise that one should be constantly 'conscious' of being in the body. Moreover, the body should be 'listened' to as all sensations in the body have meanings – they can be related to unconscious thoughts. Thus, the body becomes a living metaphor, "a set of signs to be decoded and rendered meaningful" (Barcan, Johnston 2005: 67).

FINAL REMARKS: BIRTH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SUBTLE BODY

In the Source community birth is viewed from the perspective of New Age thought. Birth is not considered just as a medical procedure, but foremost a spiritual and very intimate act. The perception of the body and the importance of birth are closely inter-related. Drawing on the subtle body model and the extracts of interviews that I have previously presented in this article, I touch on some of the aspects that help us to understand why birth is considered fundamentally important by Source practitioners.

As I have shown, in Source Breathwork community the perception of the body originates from the subtle body model. Since subtle bodies blur the boundaries between 'matter' and 'spirit', it is impossible to separate pure matter and pure spirit. The concept of cells used in Source teachings exemplifies the disruption of the binary logic that distinguishes the physical from the metaphysical: cells are definitely part of human biology and the physical body, but at the same time they are the holders of thoughts and past experiences; they are comprised of and influenced by the 'substance' called energy. Energy, the key concept of the subtle body, connects a person with other people and the world at the cellular level. If an individual is perceived from the perspective of the subtle body, the self and the body become extensive and open to the environment. The boundaries of the self are not bounded by the physical body, but they extend beyond corporeality. In this sense, the body and the self become more vulnerable and sensible about the environment. Birth is seen as an enormous change for the self – it is the manifestation of an embodied spirit, as Silje also stated: "[T]he Light, in other words God or the Spirit, came into the body". The new-born is considered to be intimately connected with the divinity and therefore, understood as the purest and most loving being (cf. Silje's claim: "OK, finally I am born. I am content with myself. I have a perfect body, I am perfect"). However, purity, love and divinity also entail the vulnerability of the new-born.

The breathing sessions are believed to give practitioners knowledge of what the entering of the Spirit into the body and birth mean, as the memories of these expe-

periences are retained in the subtle body, or, in the case of the Source community, in the subconscious and the cells or cellular memory. Drawing on the experiences that are reconstructed during the sessions, practitioners claim that birth can be a traumatic experience that significantly influences one's life. The experience of the sudden cutting of the umbilical cord in the cold birthing room and the physical pain that it causes, the feeling of artificial materials like oilcloth and the unfamiliar medical workers' hands in rubber gloves touching the body may be perceived as traumatic, since the new-born decides the new environment is not welcoming: "He/she decides that life is hell, it's a shock!" (Linda, 63 years old, 2012 interview). Moreover, as all people are believed to be connected through energy, even the thoughts that those near childbirth think can influence the new-born's decisions about their consequent life, as Silje said: "The doctors and the midwife are anxious and in panic". The negative decisions are thought to block the flow of energy and hence, the new-born "closes all the chakras, primarily the heart chakra" (Linda, 63 years old, 2012 interview). According to the holistic conception of the world, this means that the wholeness of a person is disrupted. So, from the perspective of the subtle body a traumatic birth interferes with the connection between matter and mind or body and spirit, in other words as Silje expressed this interference: "I was distracted by these birth experiences for 37 or 38 years". Since the self, in addition to the openness, is understood as 'multiple', the blockages of energy cause dissonances in all realms of life.

Although, the self is sensitive to the environment, within New Age groups the individual is also perceived to be an influential being that can impact and change his or her own life. A person always has a choice and an opportunity to become healed. Healing in general and healing birth trauma means using "the energy for changing our unconscious thoughts" (Jana, 41 years old, interview 2011). Experiences gained during the sessions and the teaching of Source Breathwork help a practitioner to activate the connection between body and spirit: "Binnie focuses on the human body and bringing the spirit to body and cells. [...] Coming back to yourself and even more, coming to your body and releasing patterns of cellular memory" (Kairi, 23 years old, interview 2011).

NOTES

1 I use the term New Age as an umbrella term to refer to a wide array of spiritual practices and beliefs which are commonly perceived as 'alternative' from the perspective of contemporary scientific-rationalist society (see further Hanegraaff 2009 [2002]).

2 See also Binnie A. Dansby's official webpage (Dansby 2012a).

3 See also Estonian Source practitioners' webpage Algallika Eesti Ühendus.

4 For example see also Turner 2011.

5 1. Physical Body (*Rupa*), 2. Vitality (*Prana-Jiwa*), 3. Astral Body (*Linga Sharira*), 4. Animal Soul (*Kama-Rupa*), 5. Human Soul (*Manas*), 6. Spiritual Soul (*Buddhi*), 7. Spirit (*Atma*) (Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 17).

6 Take, for example, the emergence of quantum theory during the first decades of the twentieth century. Although the majority of quantum scientists view quantum mechanics as completely materialistic and deterministic, there have been several attempts to interpret the findings of modern physics more philosophically: New Age thinker Deepak Chopra eventually coined the term 'quantum healing' (Hammer 2001: 276–277).

7 Here and hereafter the names of the informants are pseudonyms.

8 The originals of the interviews are in Estonian; all interviews are translated by the author.

9 For example, practitioners of auratransformation aim to join seven chakras to change a person's external aura. According to the teaching of auratransformation, a person gains the Indigo Aura when seven chakras have been conjoined into three. In the case of the Crystal Aura only one, the heart chakra, is activated. On the contrary, in New Age Tantra the aim is to open seven chakras equally to assure the flow of energy in the body and chakras. (For example, see also *Aura-transformatsiooni*TM; Kuus 2012.)

10 Adding the eighth chakra to the seven-chakra network is a relatively recent supplement. Binnie A. Dansby has named it the resurrection chakra and it is situated between the heart chakra and the solar plexus chakra.

11 Steen is a breathwork therapist who has worked with Binnie A. Dansby for more than ten years.

12 Asking the question – is your body safe? – relates to the affirmation “My body is safe, even though I may be feeling afraid”. The aim of this affirmation is to change the negative pattern “I am dangerous... My body hurts” to a positive one. (See more Dansby 2012a.)

13 Source breathwork teachings are also influenced by New Science, a field of interest within New Age. On her webpage Binnie A. Dansby quotes the book *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine* by Candace B. Pert (1999), which concludes that the body is the subconscious and hence body and mind become one. Another popular book in the Source community is *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter and Miracles* by Bruce H. Lipton (2005) in which the body-mind connection at the cellular level is stressed. Giving examples from his study of cloned endothelial cells, Lipton is convinced that beliefs can control the physical body, i.e. positive thinking prevents the emergence of diseases. For members of Source community books similar to Pert's and Lipton's represent the scientific proof of body-mind interrelatedness.

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