

## The Breath of Life, A Pictorial History

Michael J Shea, PhD, July, 2020

### Introduction

Dr. Sutherland's Cranial Concept begins and ends with the Breath of Life (BOL). It is a spiritual gift handed down through the founder of Osteopathy A.T. Still and integrated with over a generation of therapeutic practice by Sutherland, Becker, Wales and Jealous (Paulus, 1999) and many other men and women in the field. As Paulus says, *the BOL is already integrated* into the Cranial Concept. It manifests as a package of terms especially stillness, stillpoint, midline, primary respiration, Health, natural world, ignition and potency. I would like to comment on this terminology with images and a discussion of my own explorations in teaching and practicing this work. These terms can be quite vexing to students and practitioners as many people feel required to sense them as separate entities. The point is that I believe all these terms relate to the BOL one way or another.

To teach the Cranial Concept is to teach the BOL, no more - no less. References to the BOL are found throughout cultural anthropology. It is a term used by many cultures and always means a potency that can animate and bring life to the lifeless or to inanimate matter frequently found in creation mythologies. It is always associated with supernatural beings, the divine or the Holy.

As his spiritual perception blossomed, Sutherland frequently described the BOL with images and metaphors especially of *light*. Look at the first image below and how the Italian painter Caravaggio uses light in his depiction of the conversion of St Paul on his way to Damascus. It is the BOL that knocked him of his horse. This is an indication of its potency and the spiritual ignition that Saul received on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians.

The BOL is closely associated with the concept of incarnation, a close relative of embodiment. I once asked Dr. Jealous in the mid 1990s about conception ignition and he had a two-word answer – The Annunciation which is the second image below. Mary, however, is not alone in carrying the incarnate. Every human being has a spiritual potential incarnated within them. Notice the dove representing the Holy Spirit on a shaft of light entering Mary. In this image we see both the light of the BOL and a bird.

The most frequent iconography of the BOL found in traditional cultures is that of a *bird*. A bird that rests on top of a cultural midline that brings meaning to the people to cope with the unbearable pain and exquisite pleasure of life that must be navigated during the lifespan. And of course when Sutherland was asked about the BOL clinically, he merely responded “be still and know.” This is from Psalm 46, an always relevant expression of King David in today's time (A version of Psalm 46 that I transliterated is found at the end of this essay).





The Annunciation

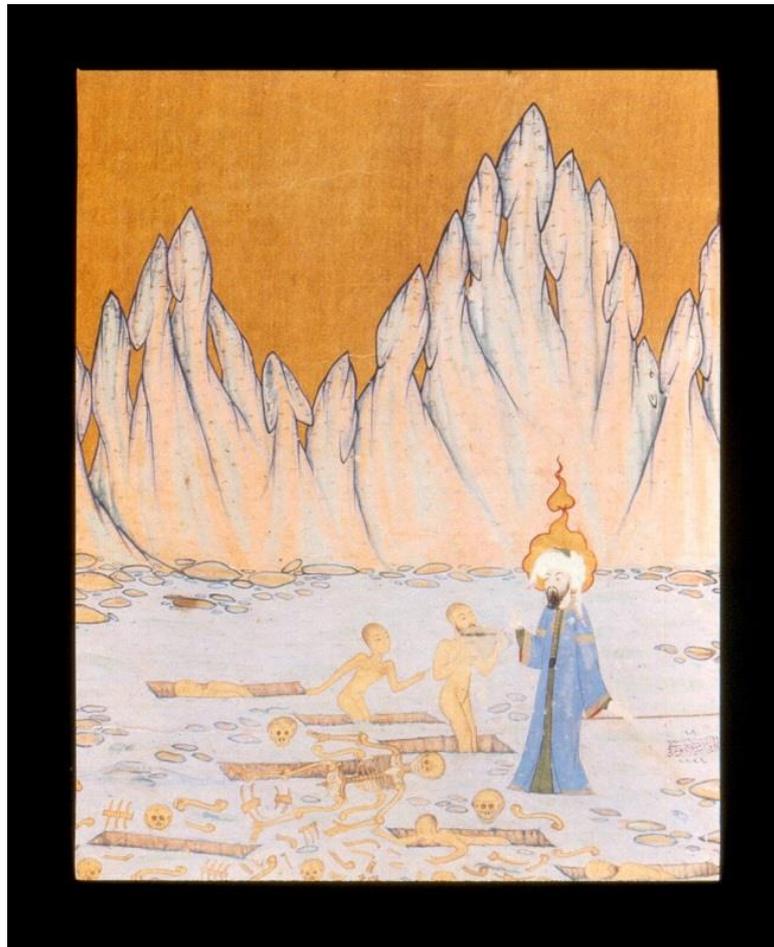
The entire spiritual orientation of Osteopathy began when its founder A.T. Still said “I love my fellow man because I see God in his face and in his form.” The Cranial Concept specifically is full of the various metaphors from the sacred to the mundane all springing from Sutherland’s spiritual filter and use of the term BOL. These terms are also deeply rooted in a cultural and medical anthropology that supports health and healing as a spiritual endeavor. I understand the need to separate them to teach them and to observe the diversity of faiths and beliefs among practitioners, but in essence they are one thing, one whole, the BOL which is not an exclusive Christian term.

### **The Bible**

When I first started teaching in the 1980s, I did a brief survey of various cultures using the term BOL. Clearly starting with the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament is the classical resource Sutherland was referring to, “and God breathed the Breath of Life into man and man became a living soul.” God exhaled and the inanimate human being inhaled and came alive. The spirit of the Lord, the BOL, incarnated with this exchange of symbolic breathing. Thus, we are originally conceived with the BOL that is always present in life and death and in between death and life. Conception takes on a range of different hues. The term Yahweh in the Old Testament can mean inhale-Yah and exhale-Weh. The name came to be regarded by Jews (c.

300 BC) as too sacred to be spoken. Thus, the BOL as Yahweh exhales, causes us to inhale by filling our lungs and the reverse as we exhale, Yahweh inhales. Consider this possibility and connection for several moments. And that is how we are born with a powerful first breath to ignite the lungs and pulmonary circulation. And we die with the last breath on the exhale!

Below: This image of the Prophet Ezekiel is found in: *The Body, An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism* (Elder, 1996). He says: "bones are that part of the body that does not decay and so is symbolically immortal. The spiritual reanimation of a dead person must begin with the bones."



Ezekiel prayed to Yahweh to revive the Jewish nation from the persecution it was enduring at the time. And the skeletons arose from their graves animated by the BOL. An entire nation is brought back to life from death expresses the potency of the BOL to raise the dead both literally and figuratively. The BOL has the power to revive an entire nation!

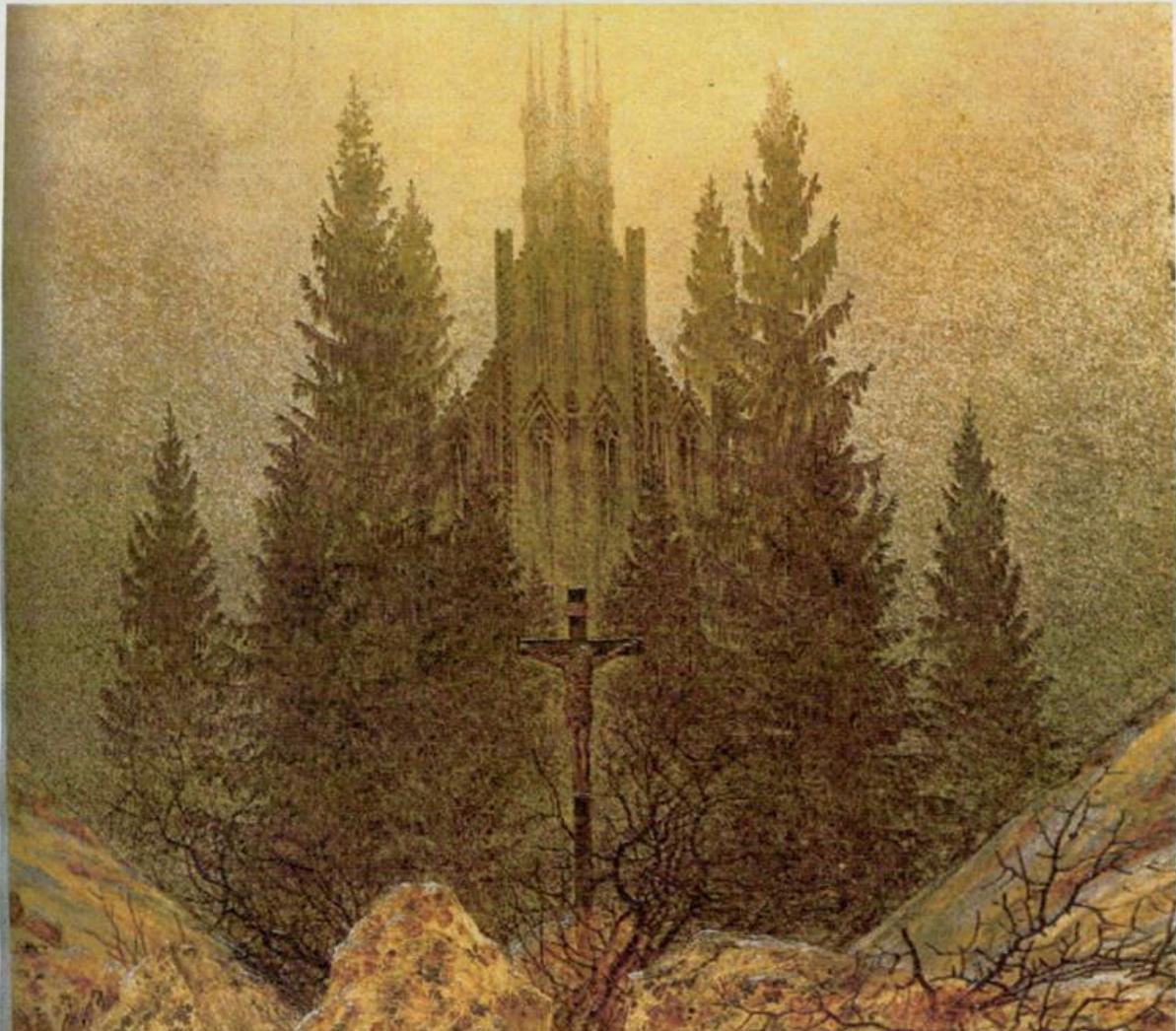
Below: Jacob's Ladder is a ladder leading to heaven that was featured in a dream the biblical Patriarch Jacob had during his flight from his brother Esau in the Book of Genesis. Is this our deeper midline, the connection of body, mind and spirit?



The New Testament is the story of Jesus and his love, sacrifice and resurrection. The cross is the midline of Christianity. All midlines express the meaning of life symbolically for the culture in which it appears. The first image below is by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). At the foot of the cross is the skull of Adam thus depicting the origin story of the resurrection in the Old testament of the Bible.



Below: In this image of the crucifixion, there is a sense of stillness and openness, beauty and the sacredness of the natural world all in one. Observe how the artist merges a sense of sacred wonder with the natural world.



C. D. Friedrich, *Cross on the Mountain*, Dusseldorf

## Traditional Cultures

The Mayan culture, the Navajo culture and the Haida culture of the Pacific Northwest all use the motif of a bird on top of their cultural midline. The bird represents the BOL. In the Mayan culture the midline arises from the belly of the alligator as a corn stalk with a bird on top. The creation story for the Navajo is from the earth up to the surface and again the corn stalk with a bird on top. And likewise, the Haida make their great totems telling their origin story to bring meaning to one's life with a bird usually on top or somewhere carved into the totem pole itself.

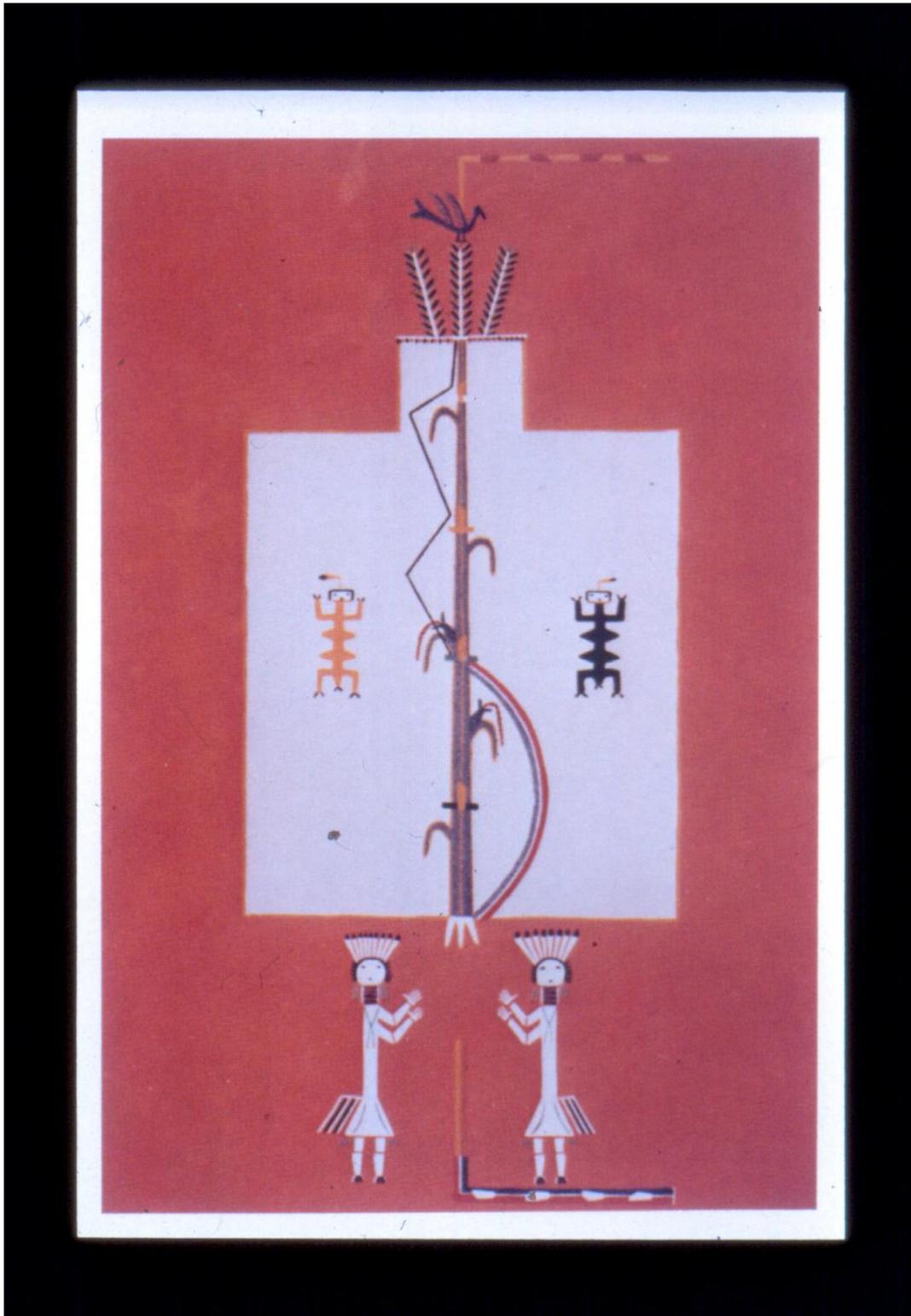
Always the bird is present on top of such totem poles and other traditional cultural midlines. The BOL is associated with the whole story of life not just human conception. Every single facet of life where nothing gets left out and everything is woven together in a tapestry of wholeness by a single thread of one's spiritual connection with the BOL. It has 1000 faces according to the Sufi tradition. One thread, a thousand colors!

These cultures then use healing rituals to either symbolically regress the patient to their conception or the conception of the universe when all was in balance and whole. A symbolic regression to the spark of the BOL that ignited a human originality. Thus, the beginning represents an undefiled wholeness that is accessed through sacred ritual and includes the celebration of the potency of the BOL. This is also the intention of biodynamic practice as I know it. The beginning of wholeness is always available in the present moment as the BOL.

The Mayan:



The Navajo:



The Haida:





Above: The perpetual embryo by Friedrich Wolf. The umbilicus is the midline of the universe.

## **Dynamic Morphology**

Jaap van der Wal, a Dutch embryologist says that anything that begins as metabolism in the embryo becomes physiology shortly before and after birth. It gradually becomes a living psychology and then an embodied/incarnated spirituality. And this is from his study of dynamic morphology, the movement of the physical forces involved with growth and development of the human being. Metabolism is the very thing that Cranial practitioners come into relationship with at the most basic elemental level - molecules and the movement of fluids in the interstitium.

These are the four stages of morphological life:

- Metabolism as the core.
- The unfolding of anatomy and physiology.
- The gradual development of personality and survival strategies as psychology.
- Uncovering the spiritual thread that unites all levels of life and being. Thus, the spiritual force of the BOL is always present before, during and after human conception. The spiritual is necessary as a foundation because of the increasing levels of complexity in growth and development at these four levels no matter how long we live. Yes, we even develop spiritually!

We must also remember that these four levels of morphology are all happening simultaneously as well as sequentially. This is an important understanding not just culturally but clinically. Each level in the Cranial Concept is assigned rates of movement, physical properties, and learning a spectrum of disfunction biomedically but not spiritually. In medical anthropology all healing was spiritual healing. Reuniting the physical and medical with the spiritual is not so easy. But the mystery does clarify after lots of practice and unknowing. Be Still and Know.

The image below is the patron saint of compassion in Japanese Zen Buddhism, Kannon. Her we can see she is dispensing the elixir of compassion from her magic wand onto a pre-nate. The pre-nate is looking up to her and tethered to the earth below by its umbilical cord. In this way we can consider the metabolism of the embryo to be nothing other than the spiritual elixir of compassion. Thus, we start embodied life incarnating as a spiritual being. We are already whole although it is an undifferentiated body and spiritual whole. Jaap van der Wal refers to a differentiated spiritual whole later in life that we grow into as everyone attempts in their own way to manage life, old age, sickness and death in ourselves and others.



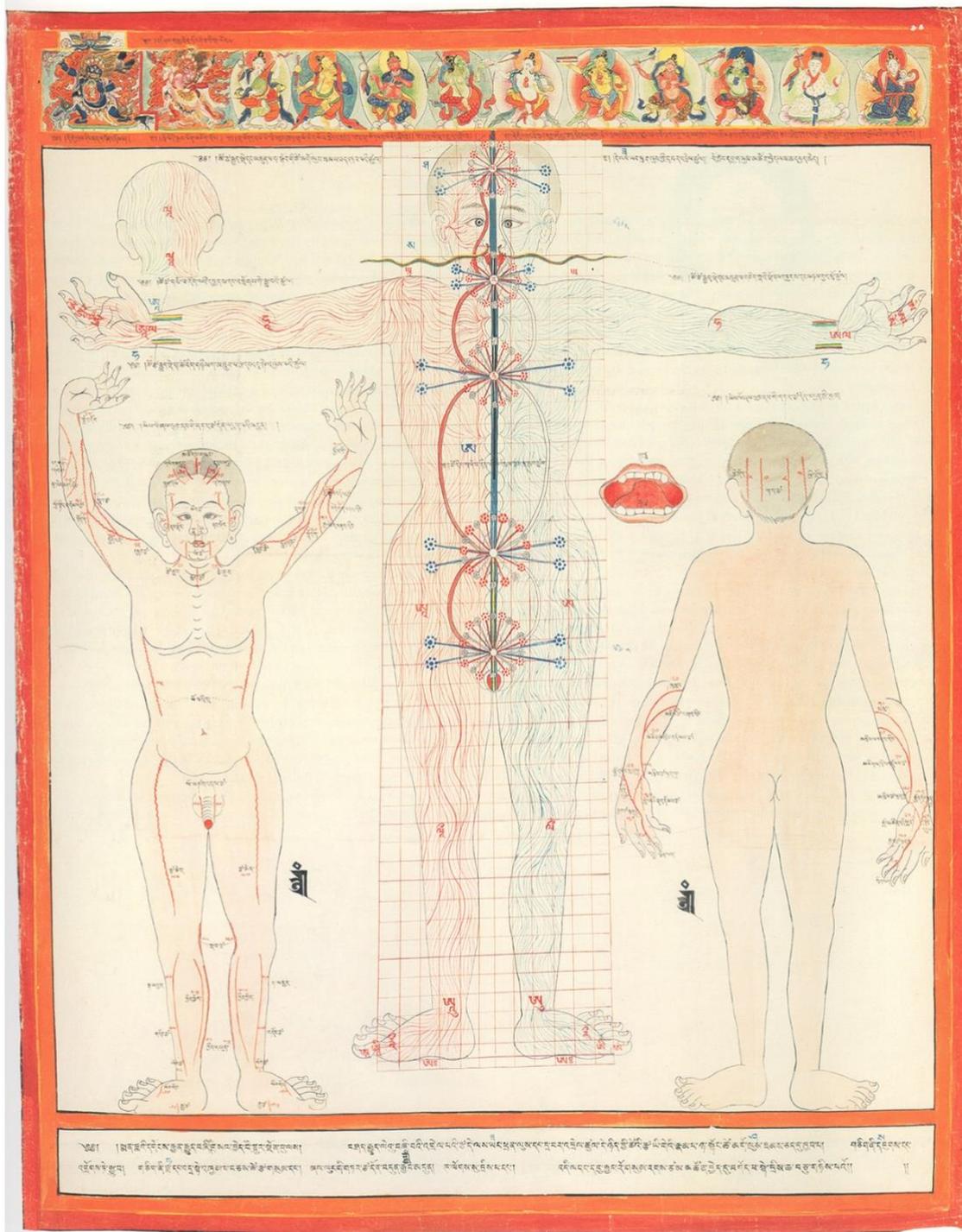
### **Three Bodies**

It is convenient to borrow classifications of embodiment from Eastern traditions to deepen our understanding. Since the BOL is present before, during and after conception then we form around and already inhabit a perfectly pure body. This is sometimes called the very subtle body in Eastern thought. It is sometimes called the Health in Osteopathy and is an octave of the BOL already present inside of us.

Metabolism traditionally means a building up (anabolism) and breaking down (catabolism) of tissues and so forth in the physical body. Thus, the most basic metabolic flow of life is nurturing and eliminating at all four morphological levels. It is here in this domain of metabolism that our most significant physical problems can arise as demonstrated by the overlapping pandemics of Metabolic Syndromes, Covid-19 and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Inappropriate nutrition and/or blocked channels eliminating waste products create a level of toxicity and thus the need for detoxification and purification processes to prevent most disease processes.

Metabolism also means the movement of molecules across and around cellular membranes and cell aggregates becoming their definitive fate anatomically and physiologically. The movement of molecules can be subtle, and it is the cause of such movement that the Cranial Concept builds its reputation. At a subtle level, terms such as the BOL, primary respiration, and the various classifications of Chi, are used to describe the motivating physical forces of metabolic movements both positive and negative such as blocked Chi. Thus, there is the subtle body with other components associated with terms such as midline (channels and chakras) and the composition and organization of Chi flow in these channels. This is the subtle body and I am oversimplifying it.

Then there are the movements of the major fluid systems associated with our not so subtle physical body of anatomy and physiology. The cerebrospinal, lymph and blood are contained with channels linked to the subtle and very subtle. This physical body is the starting point of manual therapy. Its anatomy and physiology must be known including the generation of safety by the practitioner for any therapeutic input to be successful by any definition. Safety is an expression of the BOL. Students are taught the rates and rhythms of these fluids as a way of tracking the Health in the client's body. But all rates and rhythms are superficial and must be discarded upon their perception. Can you hear Dr. Sutherland saying: "Get as far away from your touch as possible." The basis of perceiving the BOL is a dynamic stillness. Practitioners must move their attention away from rates and rhythms into the stillness and wait for the priorities of the BOL to manifest in the field of relationship with the natural world rather than exclusively in the client's body. Stillness is the waiting room in biodynamic practice.



Above: An image of the subtle body from Yuri Parfionovitch, Gyurme Dorje and Ferdinand Meyer (Editors). Foreword by the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Tibetan Medical Paintings, Illustrations to the Blue Beryl treatise of Sangye Gyamtso (1653-1705). Volume One Plates, Page 34, Interconnecting Blood Vessels: Anterior View. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc (1992).



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Giorgione, *La Tempesta* — cm 78 x 72 , Venezia, Gallerie dell'Accademia

The German word for breast feeding is “stillen” – Stillness. Notice the context of the natural world.

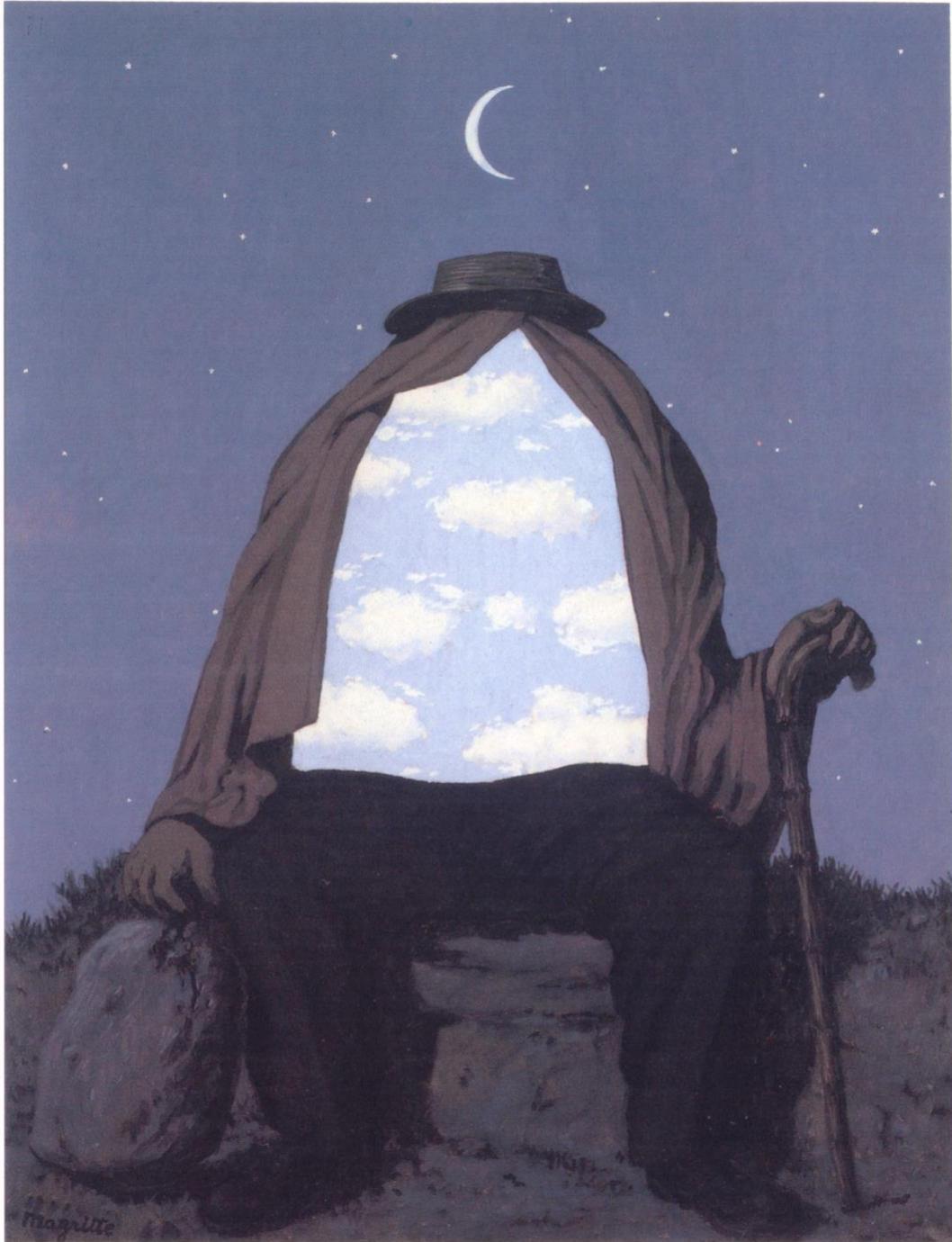


Above: Utagawa Hiroshige (1797 - 1858) Oban tate-e, from the Edo meisho hyakkei series, One Hundred Views of Edo, Mitsumata Wakare's Edge, Mitsumata watershed basin. Signed Hiroshige, 1857. An image of stillness inherent in the natural world. Is the light on the horizon the BOL or the whole image such as when we look at the natural world in the daylight?

These three bodies, very subtle, subtle and physical all coexist together as one thing. However, frequently practitioners are trained to come into relationship with one aspect of the physical body and yet our perception is moved by the subtle body or we get a small glimpse of the very subtle and say to ourselves, “what the hell was that?” Biodynamic practice is a bit like three-dimensional chess as seen played on the television series Star Trek - Next Generation. And then, frequently the language our teachers (and their books such as mine) give us to describe such experiences are based on a client orientation rather than a therapist orientation of sensory experience in their own body. In other words, there is too much focus on trying to name and label what we are feeling with our hands in the client first. This must be reversed. The therapist is totally present but non-attached to the outcome.

Below are two paintings by a surrealist artist Rene Magritte. They are both entitled “The Therapist.” Notice how he captures the *heart essence* of being a bird with the cage door open and then as open sky. Our heart can be the bird of the BOL as well as the dynamic stillness of the open sky. Can we all achieve this perception?





The Cranial Concept has emerged into a phenomenological exploration in which the coded language it has used for a hundred years may no longer be appropriate for describing what's happening in the client's body let alone the practitioner's unique embodied experience. Even using a term like the BOL can be inappropriate or as Dr. Jealous once said, "not every client wants to see God!" Each practitioner is charged with owning the work they have learned and evolving a personal descriptive language that most closely resembles their inner and outer experience. The BOL is a value, a spiritual value, that can be expressed many ways. For me, it is associated with states such as love, grace, compassion, equanimity, gratitude, empathy and much more.



The Repentant Magdalen by Georges de La Tour c.1635-1640. Notice the reverence she has for touching the skull of Jesus and the single light of the BOL. It reminds me of the sacred vocal music, *A Feather on the Breath of God* written in the 12th century by the German abbess Hildegard of Bingen and recorded in April 1985. This is the most basic principle on how to touch the cranium biodynamically. Sutherland said that such *reverence* is a necessary part of our work.

## **BOL Treatment Principles**

What then does a set of treatment principles look like based on the preceding discussion?

1. Perception that includes the sanctity of the natural world is critical to health and healing.
2. Always listen to birdsong. Always let it center your attention without trying to figure out what type of bird is singing but rather, is there a message especially regarding ignition phenomenon or not? Learn what to accept and what to reject perceptually.
3. All noise distractions are reminders to cut recreational and wandering thoughts and come back to the treatment room and our hands.
4. Sleep jerking and being overcome with tiredness during a session is an extrasensory state in which the BOL is at work in a dimension that requires the practitioner's non-attention or non-focus and also being present for the experience safely. Sleep may be indicated for the practitioner if such states persist.
5. The BOL has many psycho-spiritual-physical manifestations as it permeates all things. It has neither a beginning or an ending. It is simply the thread that weaves the whole together.
6. Perception is a triad: the knower-subject, the known-object, and the knowing of both subject and object as one thing. Knowing is boundless. Find a spiritual practice the deepens boundlessness – the melting, the dissolving of polarized sensation, good versus bad and so forth.
7. Minimize the mental labeling and naming of objects especially while treating a client.
8. The “other pair of hands” is an apparition of the BOL. It has 10,000 faces including primary respiration and stillness.
9. The BOL operates from any distance since it transcends local and non-local, space and time.
10. When in contact with the client all senses including the mind must be open and permeable and not just the hands. This is sensory balance and opens the filter to catch a scent of the BOL.
11. Training in the perception of primary respiration is a valid starting point for entering the richness of the entire spectrum of BOL experience from the mystical to the mundane.
12. Training in the embodiment of the breath reaching the bottom of the midline internally and sensing one's heartbeat is the interface between embodiment and incarnation.
13. Perception of the BOL is a continuous practice 24/7 with all experience. Meet every moment heart to heart.

## **Conclusion**

It is all good! You cannot go wrong with the BOL.

## **References**

The Breath of Life: The Fundamental Principle of Osteopathy by Steve Paulus, DO, June 1999, Inter Linea, Dedicated to Explore the Evolution of Osteopathy  
Volume 1, Number 1, Pages 6-8

## Psalm 46

You are our protection and strength  
Help in the storm of anguish and despair  
Precisely and easily found close at hand  
So we are not afraid  
Even when earth's in upheaval  
When mountains are carried to the sea  
When the sea's waters roar and foam  
And the mountains quake and tremble with the waters' swelling  
In the middle of the world there is a river  
Streams run to it, making glad your cities  
Making glad the places where you are known  
You flow as the water of that river  
And she shall not be moved  
For you are with her  
You are the morning that dawns over the quiet waters  
Nations rage, kingdoms tumble  
This is the sound of your voice  
This is the earth melting away  
You are with us, our refuge, our silent center  
What we see is all your doing  
These desolations  
These terrifying moments  
Only your unmoving movement  
You cause wars to cease when they cease, to cease forever  
You break the weapon, snap the knife blade  
Burn up the war machines

*Be still - be still  
And know me  
Be still and know  
That I am what nations long for  
I am earth's desire*

So, we know you are with us  
Our refuge at the silent center of things

Transliterated by Michael Shea from five different versions of this Psalm



ôban yoko-e, from the series "Eight Views of Omi (Omi hakkei no uchi)" Autumn Moon at Ishiyama (Ishiyama shugetsu), Signed Hiroshige, 1834. In Zen, the glow of the full moon represents the clear translucent light of the awakened state. Is the BOL the awakened state?