**Prolegomena to Spiritual Research Paradigm:**

**Importance of Attending to the Embodied and the Subtle**

Heesoon Bai, Simon Fraser University

Patricia Morgan, University of New South Wales

Charles Scott, City University of Seattle

Avraham Cohen, City University of Seattle

**Executive Summary**

Our chapter begins with an acknowledgment that the historical invalidation of the subjective has resulted in paucity of spiritual research paradigms (henceforth, SRP) and that research in spirituality is grounded in research in human subjectivity. We introduce a psychologically nuanced understanding of the ‘spiritual’ and propose a working definition that is a) signalled to us by phenomenologically-observed subjective experience and b) is derived from an ecological model of human experience. These two aspects of our conceptualization of the spiritual are fundamental as the former acknowledges our emphasis on first-person experience, while the latter grounds our approach in the intersubjective or second-person experience and is, we suggest, frequently experienced in intensely-felt first-person and second-person or subjective and intersubjective states. We will make the case that the subjective and intersubjective are foundational grounds of spiritual research, as immersion in them is necessary for us to access the fullness of spiritual experience. As well, we argue that, given the inter/subjective ground of the spiritual, *both* the researcher and the participant would be immersed in a contemplative state of consciousness. Moreover, we confirm the importance and merit of researching spirituality as it can supply insight in areas such as, but not limited to, development of ethical responses, equanimity and compassion.

This chapter proposes to: a) validate the importance of research into the subjective and legitimate subjectivist and intersubjectivist research methods; b) explicate vital elements of a SRP; and c) sketch a preliminary model of a SRP, that is, spiritual research paradigm, along the lines of our various arguments for inter/subjectivist research methods. Our contribution through this chapter to the project of establishing a SRP is modest at this stage, given the nascence of this work. Our work establishes the *ground* for the spiritual research, and thus is more of an introduction, a prolegomenon to a more fully developed SRP. With our work, we aim to support spiritual researchers and return a metaphysics of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to the research domain.

**Meaning of the Spiritual**

It is important for us to inquire into the meaning of the spiritual from the outset. We need to know what we are talking about—our subject matter—before we can talk about establishing a SRP. We the authors acknowledge that there are, as to be expected, multiple meanings of the spiritual (Sheldrake, 2013). In fact, we could create a spectrum of meaning with one end connoting the transcendental reality more or less separate from human reality, lying beyond ordinary human cognition. The spiritual here could be external to humanity in origin and function. This is the *transcendental* conception of the spiritual. The other end of this spectrum would point to the spiritual as being *immanent* in human reality and experience. We locate our own work on SRP closer to this second end of the spectrum, although we acknowledge that human reality, and what is possible for humans to experience, is an open-ended or emergent phenomenon, and thus, in that sense it can be understood as transcendental.

The spiritual is as constitutive of human reality as ordinary human colour perception is. But then, we may rightly ask, how is spiritual experience different from other human experiences, be they perceptual, cognitive, somatic, or affective? What distinguishes the former from the latter? Taking the perspective of the contemplative arts and sciences (Brady, 2007; Burggraf & Grossenbacher, 2007; Grace, 2011; Haight, 2010; Morgan, 2012, 2013; Plante, 2010; Sellers-Young, 2013; Solloway, 2000), in which we the authors are deeply grounded as researchers and practitioners, we say that the spiritual experience is registered in, manifests in, and is informed by perceptual, sensory, cognitive, somatic, affective, and volitional modes or channels of experience. In other words, spiritual experience when sensed in or enhanced by contemplation enables experience of the extra- or more than ordinary states of consciousness in multidimensionality of human experience. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. More meaning or meaningfulness, greater insight, more wisdom and compassion, more vividness, acuity, vitality, connectivity and so on, are added to all our ordinary experience.

Moreover, what is usually experienced as a single-dimension of experience, such as in our ordinary experience of five-senses, is of an ecological nature in spiritual experience in that the ordinarily separate dimensions of experiences are interconnected, and they interpenetrate.

***Patricia****: I have been blessed to experience brief periods of spiritual inter-relationality in meditation and yoga groups, though it is a solitary moment of spiritual interconnection that I am reminded of as I reflect on this aspect of spiritual experience. It came on an ordinary morning some years ago as I stood in the Warrior II yoga pose (Virabhadrasana II), legs wide, feet planted on the floor, toes curling into the cream carpet of a bedroom in my Mother’s house. Lifting my arms into the full posture, looking down the middle finger of my right hand, my right arm reaching towards the window, I experienced something extraordinary. I am still not sure how long it lasted but I felt as though the shape of my body somehow locked directly into a universal template of interconnecting energy. The interweaving lines underpinning all creation, flowing through me and beyond, infinitely.*

*While there is a role for reflection in contemplative practice and spiritual research, it does not replace or stand in the way of the centrality of the subjectively felt experience and pure awareness in that experience.*

A paradigmatic example of such interconnectivity and interpenetration is Zen experience. Zen literature speaks of the enlightenment experience as being sensorially cross-channelled: for example, during *kensho* (momentary enlightenment experience) moments, one hears colour and sees sound (Bai, 2003). To recap and elaborate further: spiritual experience is phenomenologically rooted in human subjectivity. ‘Spiritual’ here signals that the experience: a) is sensorially and perceptually extraordinary or non-ordinary, including experience of enchantment[[1]](#footnote-1); b) could include ‘peak experience’ or heightened performance[[2]](#footnote-2); c) comes with a sense of wholeness, integration, and even cosmic harmony[[3]](#footnote-3); d) is imbued with abundant heart-qualities such as compassion, love, kindness, joy, etc.[[4]](#footnote-4); e) registers a sense of sacredness and ecstasy[[5]](#footnote-5); f) could be endowed with extraordinary clarity and insight into things[[6]](#footnote-6); g) and/or is charged with creativity and vitality[[7]](#footnote-7). The list we authors created here is certainly neither exclusive or exhaustive nor authoritative. We have encountered these attributes associated with spiritual experience in the literature on spirituality we read and consult. We are also working with them ourselves in our spiritual practices.

While we acknowledge that there may be a dimension of spiritual experience that goes into the truly extraordinary, such as clairvoyance, certain unusual physical abilities, extrasensory perceptions, and the like, for our present work with the SRP, we will focus on the spiritual roots in ordinary, everyday, human subjectivity. But then herein lies the problem. Historically, the spiritual roots in human subjectivity have been shaken. The subjective has been invalidated or marginalized in modern and postmodern history. Thus, our first step in creating this SRP is to re-establish the roots; that is, the subjective roots of spirituality. We the authors take the first step by acknowledging the importance of the subjective in human experience, followed by our engagement with inter/subjective phenomena.

**Invalidation of the Subjective**

We offer a philosophical, historical, and cultural perspective that the invalidation of what is subjectively—and, relatedly, intersubjectively—experienced has its foremost roots in the ascent of the modern philosophy and partially of postmodern and poststructuralist philosophies. The rise of materialist empiricism, which is the foundation of modern science, concomitantly precipitated marginalization of the subjective—the domain of the experiential (Laing, 1967, 1980). The objective and reasoned truths of the modernist focus, which have emerged out of historical and cultural experience and biases, are dominant as research methodologies in western (especially academic) culture. Intuitive, somatic, and contemplative ways of knowing have been marginalized until recently (Wilber, 1999).

Marginalization and invalidation of the subjective is not confined to the modern worldview, however. Postmodernity, the reaction against modernity, has, ironically, also in many ways not been helpful to reclaiming the subjective with its focus on exterior, sociocultural and historical contexts and dynamics. While postmodern and poststructural perspectives have indeed been welcome in the phenomenological study of human experience insofar as they demonstrated that inner experience can have sociocultural, historical, or environmental determinants—a significant point that previously was not recognized—these perspectives, at their extremes, have tended towards overemphasizing the sociocultural and environmental construction and determinacy of human subjectivity, thus, again, ironically end up marginalizing and even denying the subjective, phenomenological realities (McIntosh, 2007; Wilber, 2006). At the academic level, this has manifested in a marginalization of phenomenology, existentialism, and study of spiritual experience from any perspective other than a poststructuralist one, where the focus is not on subjective interiors but on objective exteriors and the influence they have on shaping human experience (Taylor, 1991, 2007; Wilber 2006).

In popular culture, the ascent of postmodernism has translated into values relativism and the acceptance of multiple perspectives (Huyssen, 1986; Jameson, 1991; Lash, 1990). Again, these shifts have been beneficial in legitimating previously marginalized cultural perspectives, but there has also been an associated trivialization and flattening of values (“all values are equal”; “all values are socioculturally determined”) and a resultant focus on external, and often superficial, cultural memes that ignore interior depth (see, for example, Wilber’s (2001) exploration of “flatland”).

By the same token, everyday psychological engagement often grossly marginalizes the subjective. This happens almost from the beginning of human life. By not fully attending to the subjectivity of infants and maturing human beings, we minimize, marginalize, and disqualify the core of humanity. Often we are all too busy convincing each other, by tone, gesture, attitude, as well as in words, that what we experience subjectively is not too important, not legitimate, or not worth having. Most often we are well-meaning and attempt to understand what our children, friends, family or students are trying to explain to us, but don’t have the time or are unable to understand their idiosyncratic attempts to describe what they are feeling. The subtle or not-so-subtle pressure not to feel what we feel can result, and is, we contend, the origin of losing connection with who we are (Cohen 2013, 2014).

In psychotherapeutic terms, this loss of connection is known as alienation or rupture, which has serious and potentially lifelong implications. The foremost challenge with the rupture is that it represents something invisible. It is not about what is done to the infant or child. It is about what the infant or child did *not* experience. What was not experienced was the sheer warmth and electricity of unbridled attention, affection, and connection (Liedloff, 1977; Bowlby, 1988; Schellenbaum, 1990); Miller, 2005: Karen, 2003). The effects of this are available to be noticed everywhere, including in those who end up researching spiritual experience, such as the authors of this chapter our selves. However, the signs of the omissions are so prevalent that they have become almost completely normalized, the consequence of which being that all the evidence is beneath the waves of consciousness of most. Hence, if spiritual research is to be done ‘expertly,’ then the researchers will need to be deeply involved in their own inner work (Cohen, 2015) to discover and recover from the glaring effects of the wounds of omission.

***Avraham****: A distinction is commonly made between the spiritual and psychological dimensions. I am in agreement with Professor Reggie Ray (c. 2005, Personal Communication, Vancouver BC, Canada) who said, “The psychological is spiritual.” My view and my experience is that a person forms egoic structures that are in the service of living as well as possible within the context of circumstances that exist. The following vignette describes an inner work process that demonstrates how the psychological dimension is spiritual, a way to work with this, and the transformational possibility:*

*I am an undergraduate. I am driving to school early one morning. I am filled with worries about myself, my schoolwork, my relationship with my girlfriend, and my future. I feel tied up in knots and a little sick in my stomach. I get to the parking lot, find a spot, and turn off the engine. I am quite early for class. I sit in the car. It is a sunny day. I do not feel any sunniness within me. I feel very lonely, frightened, and sad. I allow the feelings to emerge. I have a memory of being a small child. I am four years old. I am standing in my bedroom of our house in Toronto. There is no furniture. A few of my toys are on the floor in the middle of the room, including my favourite, my toy gas station, including the little cars that go with it. I know we are moving to somewhere called Vancouver. I am concerned that my gas station will not be packed up by the moving people. I tell my Dad that I am worried about my gas station. He assures me that the men will not forget it and that it will be delivered to Vancouver. Flash forward. We are in our new house in Vancouver. Everything is unpacked. My gas station is not here! I am bereft.*

*The little child that I am is alone. I am helpless. I feel the same way sitting now in my car in the back end of C Lot at UBC. I feel great sympathy and compassion arising in me. The little child that I am is the recipient. The relationship between the small me and the caring me is growing. I feel calmer. My life energy is more available. I look out at the morning sky. I feel an amazing sense of connection to the sun’s light, the autumn air, and the whole world. I ‘know’ that my life energy is flowing freely and that it is connected to the infinite whole of the universe. At that moment I awaken to a truth that cannot be explained only lived.*

Another reason for the neglect of attending to subjectivity may have to do with the widely held belief about the ineffability of subjective experience and its idiosyncratic nature. While we authors confirm that subjective experience is difficult to talk about, we do not subscribe to this ineffability thesis (Morgan, 2013). We recognize that “the map is not the territory,” that is, talking about and representing something is not the same as experiencing that something. However, this does not mean that we cannot talk about the subjective experience. In fact, we do this all the time, though when attempting to describe this foundational aspect of our experience, we frequently use metaphorical language imbued with personal meaning. This can be what makes it hard to codify, replicate and translate. Without a common language these *feeling languages* have languished in a world that requires the apparent ‘firmness’ of replicability (Morgan, 2013).

In this chapter, we are addressing a politics of subjectivity[[8]](#footnote-8) that is framed by the difficulty of ‘wording’ internal experience. This ‘politics’ entitles a position that critiques the marginalisation of subjective contemplative practice and states of consciousness (Bai & Scott, 2011), which Gillian Ruch (2010) describes as objectivity being “privileged over subjectivity, ‘hard’ facts and reason over ‘soft’, experiential, intuitive knowledge” (p. 202). While we need commonality in the ways we engage with our communities, Merleau Ponty’s (1968) observation, “Everything is cultural in us,” and “everything is natural in us (even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being)” (p. 253), signals to us the need to address the outcomes of the divisions initiated in the Enlightenment and carried on through the Industrial Revolution. For example, the splitting of the church and state, the mind and body, human and nature, has meant the loss of a significant aspect of who we are. In his study of environmentalism and the politics of subjectivity David Kidner (2001) warns of an ‘ontological insecurity’ that has resulted from the division of the human and natural worlds (p. 12).

The growing awareness of the negative impacts of these divisions means there is now a rising dissatisfaction with the legacy of the Cartesian mien (Bai, 2009). This can be seen in the development of approaches in education such as transformative and contemplative education. They, and similar endeavours in research methods, business, medicine, law, and psychology to mention a few, have emerged because of a desire for holism that was lost through Cartesian efforts to “[c]ut man off from his deeper embodied perplexities as a whole knower” (Holbrook, 1987, p. 46). Although Cartesian reason produced an exponential growth in the natural sciences, it obscured the passage back to a locus of meaning, knowledge and sense of wholeness, which lies within the individual’s subjective consciousness (Schiro, 1978).

**Reclaiming the Subjective through ‘Insider’ Spiritual Research**

As shown above, then, the task of establishing a spiritual research paradigm faces deep challenges in a modernist and postmodernist culture that has marginalized, even denied, the spiritual and privileged the material. Scientific research deals with the material—that which can be quantified, measured, and replicated. Therefore, these approaches and their quantitative methods are considered to produce accurate, valid and supposedly ‘true’ findings that become the metanarratives of modernism. By the same token, the subjective, hence, immaterial, is disqualified and de-privileged as a proper subject of research, not those who represent the scientific method but those who embrace scientism and adopt a scientivistic epistemology: that science is the means to the only valid form of knowledge and understanding about ourselves and the world. The same is true in postmodern circles, where ethnographic and critical research methods are privileged; again, the subjective is considered irrelevant or passé.

From the perspective of the empirical research, the spiritual is doubly suspect and marginalized as a proper research matter, for, allegedly, the spiritual even goes beyond the domain of the subjective. In the face of the prevalence of this kind of understanding and assumptions, we the authors propose to establish the meaning of the spiritual in the terms of subjective experience (although we later broaden our horizon to include intersubjective and objective experience). In other words, we squarely posit that the spiritual is an integral part of human subjective experience. Hence, to the degree that human subjective experience is marginalized as a research subject matter, even to a greater degree is spiritual experience. It is our contention, therefore, that establishing a SRP must begin with reclaiming subjectivity as a proper and legitimate subject matter of research; and moreover, we must establish clear and rich ways of working with the subjective.

In view of the above discussion on how subjectivity has been marginalized and invalidated, both philosophically and as everyday practice, researching SRP must start with ways of recovering, reclaiming, and reinhabiting human subjectivity. Without this, spirituality has no epistemic ground to stand on, and is thus liable to be dismissed as something we cannot know, learn, teach, and research.

Fundamental to our own approach to a SRP is the concept of the contemplative practitioner-researcher, which makes this ‘insider research’ (Athanasiou et al., 2009; Van Heugten, 2004). By adopting a reflective, contemplative or spiritual practice, these researchers can develop an awareness of their subjectivities, including processes of the subtle senses, so as to enable a more refined understanding of individual participants’ embodied subjective awareness. While we emphasize the idiosyncratic nature of immersion in the subjective pre-predictive realm of the subtle senses, we also contend that we are able to understand this experience because it is not always ineffable. Importantly the spiritual researchers’ contemplative awareness is the starting point for the translation of their participants’ varied attempts to word the inner realms. To put this another way, the participant, in legitimating her or his own subjectivity and its possibilities and in developing subjective literacy, transforms the ineffable into the understandable, approachable, and expressible. This may imply bias on the part of the practitioner-researcher and raise questions about objectivity and reliability. However, it is necessary to remember that the spiritual methodology developed here is unequivocally qualitative and phenomenological. It is framed by developments in qualitative research that no longer find the positivistic aim of objectivity desirable. Rather, the focus is on less quantifiable experience, metaphor and narrative (Van Heugten, 2004), which produces the highly textured material sought from this spiritual methodology. This is because of the highly subjective nature of the phenomenon that might generally be the focus of spiritual researchers, such as an examination of the contemplative state of consciousness. The more textured the data, the more detail it provides for the under-researched area of subjective experience. The focus here reclaims the intuitive, the pre-reflective, the artistic, the effable, and the sublime. However, some degree of reliability can be established through the intersubjective sharing of experience; at the same time, however, subjective experience has an inherent validity.

In this form of qualitative research there is a deliberate attempt to collect phenomenologically sensitive data, “honouring the experiential component of all knowledge, participation and observation” (Hiles, 1999, p. 8). This is framed by an understanding of phenomenology as the study of the life-world that is “the world ... as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it...” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). In addition, knowledge is thought to arise in “the sense of *Verstehen* (understanding), which cannot be attained by the strict or empirical-analytic sciences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 214). Theorists such as Max van Manen (1977), Clark Moustakas (1994) and Donald Polkinghorne (1988) provide useful phenomenological approaches for spiritual researchers. Their emphasis on first-person experience is important in the development of a spiritual method, for as Polkinghorn asserts:

... the phenomenological map refocuses inquiry, concentrating not on descriptions of worldly objects but on descriptions of experience....The form and continuity of experience are products of an intrinsic relationship between human beings and the world.... Experience as it is directly given, occurs at the meeting of person and world (Polkinghorn in Hiles, 1999, p. 14).

***Charle****s: In my newly-adopted yoga teaching, an open mind towards contemplative practice was encouraged. One was not to expected to accept the teachings at face value but rather to test them through practice; direct, personal experience and the knowledge developed through experience were privileged.*

*As part of my regular, daily routine, I am watching the breath, letting all else come, pass by, and go; return to the breath. After about 15 minutes, I sigh deeply, as I have been informed is a natural result of steady practice. The breathing slows perceptibly. My focus deepens. Within a few minutes of this sigh, gently but with a definite, perceptible shift, there is a simultaneous profound deepening of silence and stillness and an expansion of both awareness and presence. The peace that “passeth all understanding”? Now I get it. An intimate connection with others and the world? Oh, yeah. “Center everywhere, circumference nowhere.” Yeah, I get that, too.*

*And in all of this there is an inherent meaning: meaning through the possibility of peace and serenity, meaning through the expansion of awareness and the deepening of connection to others and the world and the sense of love that emerges out of the connection. But there is in addition to the peace, the awareness, the connection, and the meaning an unexpected meta awareness of watching all this unfold. This awareness was not what we usually conceive of as a reflective practice; rather, it was just awareness. I not only was a voyager, but also was someone watching himself as a voyager. There was also the possibility of a later reflection on the journey.*

*I had embarked on a form of what I have come to see as a rigorous form of subjective research. For me, the meaningfulness of a deepened connection became spiritually central and has become my focus: the subjective voyages are now irreducibly intersubjective.*

The significance of contemplative practice is that it can provide the practitioner and the researcher a vehicle with which to navigate the subjective interiors with greater clarity. Calming the restless oscillations of the mind through breath work and focused but dispassionate attention allows for a greater sense of awareness and a concomitant witnessing of consciousness. Emerging from a calmed, more centered awareness comes a deeper sense of presence that is felt to be more intimately connected to others and surrounding ecologies and contexts. Being more sensitively attuned to our own interiors allows for the increased possibility of empathic connections to the interiors of others and, further, to a mutual, intersubjective engagement about those interiors and their many mansions.

When studying subjective experience of the contemplative and spiritual, it is important to remember that such experience is embodied, and at times ambiguous and “messy,” meaning the opposite of the Cartesian desire for the clear and distinct. Rather than attempting to regulate this ‘messiness’ by defining the conditions, controlling variables and using statistically determined methods, the spiritual researchers need to remain open to, and be led by, their participants’ emergent experience. To understand this further, we briefly outline here the key ways that qualitative and quantitative research differs, to highlight significant aspects of the approach we are proposing. Unlike quantitative approaches, the spiritual method does not “assert a physical and social reality independent of those who experience it, a reality that can be tested and defined objectively” (Rossman & Rallis, 2011, p. 8). It is interpretive, not predictive, emergent rather than prefigured, and in that sense follows a grounded approach where theory follows data collection rather than it framing this stage of research.

Qualitative approaches replace the drive for validity and reliability by acknowledging the presence of the researcher through reflexive practices. Insider research is often critiqued for its lack of objectivity, or ‘insider bias’; nonetheless, the strength of the insider researchers lies in their insight and informed perspective (Athanasiou, Darzi, & Debas, 2009). As we have asserted, this research of subjectivity has an inherent validity. The benefits of insider research do not necessarily override criticisms of the lack of objectivity and validity; however, the quantitative positivist ideal of objectivity is not always desirable in human research. As Kate Van Heugten (2004) concludes, “[s]ubjectivity is no longer eschewed to the extent it once was. With this, the exploration of less quantifiable experiences and of metaphor and narrative has been reintroduced into social sciences” (p. 207). Like many qualitative researchers, the spiritual practitioner-researchers accept the inevitability of bias, for they are less concerned with replicating findings but with the authenticity of insider research. These researchers focus on their ability to monitor personal values and beliefs in the research process by reflecting on and signaling their position. Finally, their focus is “on the context of the speaker and the account, and on the account’s ‘textuality’ and internal construction” (Opie in Van Heugten 2004, p. 207).

Although we make these distinctions between the quantitative and qualitative, or scientivistic and spiritual, to offer insight into aspects of this spiritual method, we do not understand them as the inverse of the other. While distinctions between the two can be drawn along the subjective-objective divide, it is more useful to understand that they are part of a research continuum. In the scientific method, knowledge is acquired empirically through the ‘external’ or five senses, while spiritual researchers obtain it through proprioception, inner awareness, or ‘feeling’ of the phenomena as it arises in deep focus. This can then lead to the knowledge that arises from the subtle senses as they are defined in practices such as Ayurveda and Chinese medicine.

**Attending to the Subtle and the Embodied as Key to Researching the Spiritual**

Much good work has been done drawing schemas of embodiment with which to understand or ‘grasp’ this felt-sense; however, we propose an extension to this work based on the SRP that examines pre-predicative experience, where ‘pre-predicative’ points to the pre-articulate, pre-propositional nature of experience, and its entanglement with the affective, somatic, cognitive and spiritual. Significantly, this approach is different from the currently prevailing emotional intelligence discourse and social-emotional discourse in general (see, for example, Denham & Brown, 2010; Druskat, V. U., Mount, G., & Sala, 2013; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Ryback, 2012; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2012). It is founded on an understanding of the ecological as outlined earlier, in which the affective, somatic, spiritual, cognitive and intersubjective are understood to be interwoven. From this position it acknowledges the importance and usefulness of contemplative or reflective experience as the entry point to examining these ecologies. It acknowledges the need for practitioner-researchers and their focus on subjective awareness of the pre-predicative. It encourages the development of a contemplative or reflective orientation in all stages of the research, validating contemplative approaches that integrate affective, somatic, spiritual, cognitive, and intersubjective dimensions. It encourages the introduction of creative processes in the data collection stage as an alternate means for participants to express the ‘inexpressible’.

Contemporary scholarly and practice discourses have given significant attention to human emotions. Given the traditional marginalization of human emotions in the arenas of what’s conventionally deemed as most important human achievements (e.g., sciences, mathematics, social sciences, technology, etc.), this recent interest and advocacy for human emotions are to be validated and supported. There is, however, the next step we need to take, and that is into the domain of felt sense and feelings. Feelings, as they are understood here are not the same as emotions (Levine, 2010). In terms of depth or strata of consciousness, sensations and feelings are at layers below emotion and cognition, combining the affective with other modes of being in a realm that can be understood to ground meaning making and cognition. The humanist and transpersonal psychologist John Heron provides insight into this understanding of ‘feelings’ as the “capacity of psyche to participate in wider unities of being, to become at one with the different content of a whole field of experience” (Heron, 1992, p. 16). Typically, in the din and clamour of thoughts and emotions, the subtle, ever-flowing and shifting, therefore elusive presence of feelings and sensations ~~are~~ **is** most often lost. But this is the region of subtle subjectivity that we would need to foray into, if we wish to reclaim and recover our spiritual core. It is the domain of the spiritual researcher.

Contemplative theory and practice offers a means to turn down the volume on fragmented thoughts and fractured attention so that we can experience and examine these feelings. Centering and balancing ourselves by engaging deep focus allows us to feel the ‘wider unities of being’, which provides a starting point for the development of a comprehensive spiritual methodology.

***Heesoon****: Still a vivid memory, as if from yesterday, although more than 20 years ago! Our little group of university Zen meditators gathered during the lunch hour in the Japanese Tea Gallery at University of British Columbia and conducted our ritualized Zen sitting (zazen) for an hour. We lit incense, bowed and chanted to the sound of gongs and bells. We sat in deep silence, in the classic zazen pose, sitting upright, eyes half-closed, softly distilling breaths, calming the nervous energy, and watching thoughts settle down like the dust on the road when light rain falls. I rested in awareness, forgetting the passage of time. The bell rang. Emerging from my zazen, I gazed out to the Japanese garden. Everything my gaze rested on showed up intensely fresh and alive: the cedar tree branches, dappled sunlight playing across the tree branches, berry bushes nearby . . .. I turned my gaze and looked at our meditation leader: his slightly wrinkled scholar’s face and balding head, too, looked exquisite and beautiful unlike what I usually saw in his face. “Purified” through the contemplative lens, the ordinary became extraordinary: radiant and poignantly beautiful.*

Let us further explore this region of subtle subjectivity. Beneath the layers of the affective and sensate is the layer of the energetic (I. Macnaughton, personal communication, June 3, 2011). Within each human being there is a lifeforce, an energy that ‘wants’ expression. Our view is that this original or primordial self of humanity, charged with primordial lifeforce, has been constrained and covered by layers of egoic structure that are outcomes of socialization and cultural conditioning (Cohen, 2013). These egoic structures have come into place often as a reaction to family of origin experience, culture, institutional oppression, peer pressures, school experience, and all manner of pressures that suggest to us all in our childhood that if we want to survive and be loved we had better put ourselves into a contorted and distorted shape that meets the demands that are imposed from without. Researching the spiritual therefore involves inner work and self-cultivation that both nurtures the original, primordial, self directly and works on becoming deeply aware and in touch with the egoic structures that helped us to survive. That is, researching the spiritual involves working directly with the egoic structures in the service of understanding the sub-identities that exist within us and that need to become integrated into a wholeness that is increasingly and deeply human and humane. This deep self emerges first as a struggling child and eventually as a sage.

**The Pluralistic and Ecological Framing of the Spiritual**

In further considering how best to establish a spiritual research paradigm, we suggest that the spiritual researcher takes a pluralist stance, while acknowledging the importance of context and the ecologies of their participants immersed in their contexts. Our framing of the spiritual researcher in these terms relates to the understanding that there is no final consensus on a conceptualization of spirituality (Gunnlaugson & Vokey, 2013); in a sense, it remains an elusive concept to pin down precisely. But from another perspective, a contemporary conceptualization of spirituality may have and indeed require many possible elements, reflecting our increasingly pluralistic and dynamic social structures (Beck, 1991; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Rodger, 1996). With this in mind spiritual researchers are essentially pluralists, engaging part or all of the definitions outlined earlier as they structure their approach to the phenomenon they are studying. Further, as Griffiths (1988) and Hill and Pargament (2003) point out, postmodern conceptions of spirituality are necessarily socioculturally rooted and determined, suggesting that conceptualizations are likely going to remain fluid and ecologically contextual. Griffiths adds that contemporary spirituality reflects the modern (and one might add, pre-modern and postmodern) ethos of the present, some of it negative—a perspective McIntosh (2007) shares. Holland (1988) adds that spirituality in a contemporary world itself serves as a foundation for economic, political, and cultural energies; that is, spirituality both shapes and reflects sociocultural institutions and contexts.

McIntosh (2007) suggests that an integral (Wilber, 2001, 2006) conception of spirituality would not confine itself to one “univocal definition of spirit” (p. 118). Gunnlaugson and Vokey (2013) further argue that an integral conception of spirituality allows “for the differentiation and (where possible) integration of the various meanings of spirituality current in the literature, thereby incorporating the different insights that characterise distinct spiritual traditions and discourses” (pp. 2-3).

Thus, the varied conceptualizations of spirituality and in turn spiritual research that are reflective of the dynamics of the inner and outer realities and contexts are not only *not* problematic, but are essential in fleshing out a holistically integrated and ecological framing of spirituality and approaches to researching it. It might be said that spirituality today could be seen, through an integral lens, as a force which helps integrate and render meaningful the other, inner *dimensions* of our lives—the physical and somatic, emotional, aesthetic—as well as the outer *contexts and ecologies* that contain us*—*the material and economic, historical, sociocultural, political, and environmental. That is, an integral conception considers both the four quadrants of the individual interior and exterior and the collective interior and exterior (Wilber, 2001, 2006).

Sheldrake (2013) maintains that in our pluralist contexts “… a broad, nebulous and diffuse term such as spirituality is ideal” (p. 353); such an idea is initially bewildering to those who are epistemologically wedded to the still-prevalent, modernist ethos of our time, but is more appealing to those who feel more attuned to postmodern, poststructuralist, or integral perspectives.

**Implications for Researching the Spiritual**

The significance of how we frame and conceptualize spirituality has to do not only with our awareness of what it is or might be(come) but also in considering the methods we use in exploring and working in and with our spiritual dimensions. Out of these various conceptualizations of spirituality, we find a few “take away” messages that might be of value in considering how best to establish a SRP:

* When using spiritual methods we should remain open to considering the multiple dimensions of spirituality. This would impact all stages of the research start with the initial planning and choice of research tools through to fieldwork and data analysis.
* We might consider that there is no single definition or conceptualization of spirituality that will be useful for all people or, given the dynamic nature of the self and its spiritual dimensions, for any one person over time. In short, spirituality is developmentally dynamic and developed in and through relationships. As such it is important for the spiritual researcher to identify and define their understanding of spirituality and clarify this in the excogitation of the project’s methods.
* We might understand that our spirituality and that of our participants is not individually produced but is also significantly shaped from without by sociocultural, historical, political, and environmental forces. Again this is important in the design and delivery of methods as the spiritual researcher emphasizes context in their approach.
* The varied, dynamic, contextually-fluid, and emergent nature of spirituality has implications for a methodology of inquiry. It will depend on our conceptualizations of spirituality and those of our participants. We might consider, then, that we could employ multiple methodological approaches in our spiritual explorations and that different methods might be suitable at different times and contexts through the course of our ongoing development. These methods will of necessity need to access and work through our somatic, aesthetic, moral, emotional, and intellectual dimensions, though this will be framed by the particular phenomenon one is studying. One consideration here, for example, is that some might consider spiritual experiences or beliefs to serve in lieu of psycho-therapeutic or emotional work, a phenomenon described in the literature as “spiritual bypass” (Cashwell, Myers, & Shurts, 2004). The significance for those undertaking a SRP is that the dimensions of spiritual research include psycho-therapeutic and emotional realms and considerations.

Spirituality does not exist in a vacuum but is integrally a part of our whole beings: our physical and somatic, emotional and psychological, aesthetic, moral, and intellectual dimensions. These, too, are each contextually connected to the aforementioned outer contexts. Thus it is possible that our methodological approaches will need to consider and relate to our multi-dimensional natures. Put another way, the methodologies of “outer work”—consideration of these outer contexts and forces—need to be considered alongside “inner work.” The challenge for the spiritual researcher, then, relates to reflexivity. They will need to identify how their inner and outer realities coalesce in their approach, and at least name or possibly focus on this aspect of their participants’ experience.

**The New Beginning—Concluding Thoughts**

In an era where modernist and postmodernist perspectives marginalize the subjective, it is time to re-claim it as a legitimate dimension for spiritual inquiry. Such a reclaiming simply re-asserts an important dimension of a more pluralistically sensitive, ecologically sound, and integrally grounded spirituality and SRP. Spiritual researchers will be entering domains that were once the province of well-established religious and philosophical institutions (for an example of the latter, consider the departments of philosophy housed in most universities). If they are members of these organisations, they may possibly use the theory and practices that underpin their traditions. And if they are not members of these institutions, they may find the resources and research findings of these long-established institutions of value. Then along with researchers who don’t come from these backgrounds, they will be diving into their own and their participants’ internal landscapes. These are domains that in the modern age and secular settings have for the most part been assigned to the psychological and neurosciences. Therefore an important question that we as spiritual researchers, who are possibly not psychologists, neuroscientists or clergy, have to ask is: How do we create our own maps of the interior? This starts, we believe, with contemplative practice, which provides the entry, firstly, to our interiorities and then to those of our participants’. And the field of contemplative inquiry is richly informed by sources historical and contemporary, spanning the aforementioned institutions of religion, philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, literature, and the arts. Drawing from Thoreau (who cites William Habbington), we advise prospective spiritual researchers to:

Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find   
 A thousand regions in your mind   
 Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be   
 Expert in home-cosmography (1962, p. 341)

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1. A sense of enchantment is noted by MacKian (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Spirituality as embodied is mentioned by Abram (1996), Holland (1998), and Ray, (2008). Also see Murphy (1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Transcendence and identification/connection with larger collectives, a greater wholeappears in a number of conceptualizations (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013; Gardner, 2011; Griffiths, 1988; Hodges, 2002; Johnson, 2013; Macquarrie, 1972; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; O’Shea, Torosyan, Robert, Haug, Wills, & Bowen, 2011; Walach, 2011; Wright, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Damasio (2003) considers that spirituality embodiesa feeling state**.** In a larger sense, Wilber (2006)suggests that spirituality can represent a state or states of consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is connection to something ‘sacred’ and of ineffable value (Beauregard, 2011; Griffiths, 1988; Koenig, 2008; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Newby, 1996; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Sperry, 2011; Barnum, 2010; Wilber, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Spirituality as a dimension that integrates other dimensions of our lives into a more meaningful wholeis noted by a few scholars (Sperry, 2012; McIntosh, 2007; Wilber, 2006). Emmons (2000) and Vaughn (2002) consider spirituality as an intelligenceor set of connected intelligences**.** Similarly,Fenwick & English (2004) suggest spirituality contains an epistemological framingof what is true or real or how knowledge itself is acquired. They also contend that spirituality contains a cosmology about the nature of the cosmos and our place in it. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A few scholars frame spirituality asan animating force or propulsionto creativity, meaning, love, and wholeness; and not just as a static dimension (Clark, 2011; Keen, 1995; Miller, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This term references the work of B. Alan Wallace, which is detailed in his: Wallace, B. A. (2004). *The taboo of*

   *subjectivity: Toward a new science of consciousness*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)