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Spirit and Soul – from the point of view of Linguistics and Theology

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Search for the spiritual world is possible mostly indirect way. We can pay attention to the near-death experiences, ancient divine texts, myths or dreams (The Greeks held the belief that Thanatos, „death”, is the twin brother of Hypnos, „sleep”; death is just like falling asleep and awakening again.) etc. One of these approaches is the way of linguistics which is said to be a royal way to study our beliefs and feelings in connection with spiritual phenomena.

The words *Spirit* and *soul* have linguistic and mythopoetic reality for all of us, not only for those who believe. Everyone uses a lot of expressions, idioms in the everyday language (for example: *spirited, spiritiful, spiritless, spiritual* etc.), in poems and songs day by day.

What kind of connection can we find between thinking and speaking? There are at least three types of different theories about it. One says: they are the same, there is no thinking without using a language and we must think of something when we speak. Second theory: there is no thinking without language but we can use language even if we don't think of anything. The third theory says the opposite: using language is not the only way of thinking but we must think when we speak. All the three theories have a common point: these two sets, language and thinking must have some common parts. So, studying the language we can come closer to the human thinking as well.

Cognitive linguistics says: the way we speak shows the way we think. If we study the language we can find basic cognitive, conceptual patterns as well. These linguistic patterns (metaphors, symbols) are very similar to the mythopoetic patterns or to the patterns of the collective unconscious.

Philosophers have often wanted metaphor and symbol strictly confined to literature, rhetoric and art, because of its supposed dangers to clear thinking. Over the last forty years, however, philosophers, psychologists and linguists have begun to agree that metaphor and symbol are not something that can be easily confined, but is an indispensable basis of language and thought. If metaphor and the mental processes it entails, are basic to language and cognition, then a clearer understanding of its working must be relevant.

I am sure we can come closer to understand our ancient myths, divine texts if we study linguistics: our metaphors, idioms, proverbs etc. I try to have a look at some linguistic data in connection Spirit and soul in some languages now.

In many languages people have two different words for these two concepts:

Hebrew:	ruach	-	nephesh
Greek:	pneuma	-	psyche
Latin:	Spiritus	-	anima
English:	Spirit	-	Soul
German:	Geist	-	Seele
Hungarian:	Szellem	-	Lélek etc.

If we come closer to the etymology of these pairs of words we can find close connections of them with the words meaning wind and breathing.

In the Old Testament Hebrew *ruach* and *nephesh* cover the material as well as the nonmaterial aspect; both words denote 'breath' and 'soul'. *Nephesh*, translated either as *life* or *soul*, seems to be represented in the physical reality by the blood and heart. Hebrew *ruach* is translated sometimes as *wind*, *storm*, sometimes as *soul* or *spirit*.

The Greek *pneuma* (wind, air, breathed air, respiration and spirit) is in etymological connection with the word *pneo* (to breathe) and *pneumon* (Lungs). *Psyche* derives from the word *psycho* (to breathe, to blow, to make cool). There is a third word in Greek as well, the

thumos which refers to no anatomically defined part of the body. It may point to the chest, lungs, heart as the seat of emotions, but it also may refer to the limbs if these are felt paralyzed by a shocking experience. The word defies translation because it denotes an unspeakable inside experience which affects the respiratory system as well as the circulatory system.

The same relationship is present in the Latin *animus* and *anima*, meaning 'breath' as well as 'soul'; the equivalent Greek word *anemos* means 'stream of air', 'wind'. The *animus* denotes the consciousness within the chest, or respiration, and the *anima* refers to a kind of 'air, breeze, wind'. The Latin *Spiritus* is a derivative of *spiro* (to breathe).

The English word *Spirit* (which is from the Latin *Spiritus*) is etimologically related with the well known and often used words *inspiration*, *expiration* and *conspiration* as well. *Spiritus sanctus* is translated into English not only *Holy Spirit*, but *Holy Wind* as well.

In old German you can find *der heilige Atem* besides *der heilige Geist*. (It is interesting to compare this with the Sanskrit *atman*, old German *atum*, *wiho atum* (Holy Spirit) and the German *Atem* (breathing) as well.)

All of it has roots in ancient beliefs and different religious texts.

Wind and air. Both of them are spiritual symbols. Through breathing you can be in contact with spiritual world. In numerous traditions, the rhythm of breathing symbolizes the production and reabsorption of the universe, known in India as *kalpa* and *pralaya*, centripetal and centrifugal movements coming from the heart of the vital centre. Brahma's expiration creates, his inspiration destroys the world. (The hindi word *Mahatma*'s meaning is also in connection with breathing.)

The Chinese distinguish two souls: *po* which animates man and lives for a long time after death near his tomb, and *hun*, which determines personality.

In Japanese there are also two words: *ki* (which means air, breath and vital energy, invisible life-force, somewhat equivalent to Indian *prana*) and *REI/tama* (which is closer to the meaning Spirit).

In the Book of Genesis in the Bible, air was an emanation of the breath of the Spirit of God which moved upon the face of the waters to divide them and create the firmament.

„Then the LORD God took some soil from the ground and formed a man out of it; he breathed life-giving breath into his nostrils and the man began to live.” (Genesis 2, 7)

„Then he breathed on them and said, „Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20,22)

„When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.” (Acts 2, 2)

Saint Paul made a distinction between the soul (*psyche*) which animates man's body (*soma*) and the immortal spirit (*pneuma*), under the influence of the Holy Spirit, shining through the psyche on to the complete man, so that he might live and be made whole again after the resurrection.

Scholars have distinguished three levels in the human soul: the vegetative soul which governs elementary functions (nutrition, reproduction); the sensitive soul which governs the sense organs; the rational soul governing the intellectual and affective functions that differentiate man from beast.

Breathing and our inner (emotional, spiritual) life are related to each other.

A famous Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (who was a colleague of Freud in the 1920s) worked with patients analysing not only the content of their communications, but also the form of communication, first of all the vocal communication. This led him to a detailed study of muscle tone, posture, and patterns of breathing. He found chronic patterns of muscle tension consistently associated with breathing disturbances, in all the patients he treated. He came to the conclusion that deficient expansion on inspiration or deficient relaxation on expiration, or both, was a central mechanism of neurotic repression. Later he distinguished for example schizoid, hysterical, intestinal etc. breathing patterns finding close connections between an individual's emotional balance and his respiratory rhythm.

We start life with a breath (have a look at the etymology of German *Luft* and *Leben*, or the English *Liberty* és *Life*), and the process continues automatically for the rest of our lives. It has long been known that slow, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breathing can soothe our inner storms and make us feel calm and composed.

In the West, changes in respiration have been regarded primarily as signs and symptoms of disease. Mechanisms for abnormal ventilation – malfunction of the respiratory control centers, neuromuscular disease, or excess work of breathing – have been elucidated and therapeutically modified. (Languages indicate in some general way that anxiety is accompanied by difficulties of breathing. The insufficient pulmonary ventilation is indicated by terms *anxiety* and *anguish*, the equivalent German *Angst* etc. These words derive from the Latin *ango* (to press).)

In the East, however, voluntary modifications of breathing have long been used for treatment of disease and for influencing psychological function of the nervous and other systems of the body.

Controlled breathing is one of the disciplines of Taoism, used in the art of feeding the vital principle. It allows that which is in harmony to assimilate the power of the air and escape from the ascendancy of illness, old age and death, and to free the Taoist of all fear and the domination of time and space. 'True man breathes through his heel,' according to Chuang-tu, and according to Lao-tse, the ideal method consists in concentrating your breathing until you become soft, like a baby who expends no energy and preserves power of life intact. Yogis, as Buddhists, practise rhythmic breathing in order to improve mental concentration (Pranayama Yoga).

Air is one of the four elements, the intermediary between heaven and earth, fire and water. Air is where divine inspiration, a symbol of spiritualization, is manifested.

In Hindu mythology, it is represented as a spiritual vehicle, by Vayu, god of the region of subtlety, and of the wind that rides a gazelle, the god whose standard floats in eight cosmic winds connected to eight directions of space.

Anxious people usually hold breath and speak at the end of inspiration in a high-pitched voice. Depressed ones often speak at the end of expiration in a low-toned voice.

Experimental studies of conditioned emotions and breathing make it clear that emotional arousal gives rise to conditionable changes in ventilation. The issue to be considered here centers on the effects of voluntary changes in ventilation on emotional arousal. It appears that connection between emotions and breathing is a reciprocative relationship.

We have a lot of expressions, idioms and proverbs in connection with breathing which show us the close relation between breathing and our emotional life. The roots of the

psychosomatic approach lead to linguistics as well. For example: the Arabic word *nahama* (to breath) and the Hebrew *niham* (to calm down) are etymologically in close connection with each other. Further examples:

Latin: *angustiae spiritus, vox premitur, animam accipe!*

English: air hunger, get air, it has been in the air, someone is fuming etc.

French: *conspirer, vicier l'air, il ne vent pas respirer la meme air qui lui etc.*

We often speak about Spirit and soul in metaphors and symbols. We say: soul is a bird, soul is a flame (The Canadian Naskapi Indians depict the soul as a small flame coming from the mouth. Compare: Acts 2, 1-5) etc.

What is a symbol – in general? Man has always employed symbols to describe thoughts and feelings, or to protect secret truths from common knowledge. Symbols have been used to express profound truth. These have been passed down from generation to generation, through folklore, fairy tales, myths etc. If you read them, if you delve deeper into their meanings, you can find a mass of symbols that have a common origin. These images and allegories are often archetypical, they belong to everyone. We sometimes can meet them in our dreams as well.

Let us have one example: BIRD as the symbol of freedom and spirituality. Because birds can fly freely in the air – perhaps reaching heaven -, they were often thought to be messengers of gods. In Mithraic sacrifice, the divine angel-messenger is a crow, a representation of Hermes, chosen by the Egyptians to express the immateriality of the soul. We can also meet messenger-birds and different birds (eagles, crows etc.) with spiritual meaning the Bible. Let us have some examples.

In the New Testament dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit:

„As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. Then heaven was opened to him, and saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and alighting on him.”
(Matthew 3, 16)

In the Old Testament eagle symbolizes power over death, in the New Testament eagle is the symbol the resurrection:

„He keeps me from the grave
and blesses me with love and mercy.
He fills my life with good things,
So that I stay young and strong like an eagle.” (Psalms 103, 5)

In numerous myths birds are associated with the sun. Garuda, the Hindu bird is the symbol of immortality; the Egyptian phoenix and the Vedic eagle are sun-gods.

In folk tales, men and women often metamorphose into birds (swans, crows etc.). The bird is an attribute of Minerva, and symbolizes knowledge of the unconscious, the basis of wisdom.

Wings symbolize the idea of spiritual ascension connected to superior states of consciousness. The wings of a bird have been used many times to depict the divine spirit, and, by analogy, the human soul (in Assyria, Egypt, India etc.)

We can cite a part from the song of Moses which shows us the motive of an eagle protecting its young – symbolizing God’s protecting love:

„He protected them and cared for them,
as he would protect himself.
Like an eagle teaching its young to fly,
Catching them safely on its spreading wings,
The Lord kept Israel from falling.” (Deuteronomy 32, 10-11)

Feathers symbolize an Indian chief’s spiritual authority. The goddess Maat, in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, wears them on her head as a symbol of truth and justice. In the same book, the soul of the deceased is symbolized in a falcon.

Cognitive semantics study basic metaphors, the so called root analogies. One of them is: BUILDING = BODY, or HUMAN = BUILDING. It means we think soul exists somewhere inside our body. But there are cultural differences concerning the place, the „home” of the soul between languages. It can be the heart, the liver, the belly etc.

Let us have one example. In the Bible we can read about the center of a person, about the essence of someone’s inner world mentioning the heart.

„While I slept, my heart was awake.” (Song of Songs 5, 2)

„You know my heart..” (Psalms 17, 3)

In Japanese there is also a word *SHIN*, *kokoro* which means:

1. Heart, mind, spirit, motive, sense, mentality, idea, thought, feeling. The non-physical aspect of the human being.
2. The physical heart with pumps blood.
3. The center, the core; the most important point, pivotal aspect. Essence, core, marrow.

But sometimes they also use *hara* (belly) or *kimo* (liver) when they speak about the soul.

Hara (with meanings abdomen, stomach, belly, viscera, womb) is used in a number of Japanese idioms having to do with emotions, thoughts, intentions, or character.

These and other expressions using the word *hara* indicate that the abdominal region has traditionally been considered the focus of emotions, thoughts and intentions. In the practice of Zen meditation and the martial arts, the student is told to concentrate his energies on the center of the abdominal region. The ritual suicide *seppuku* testified to their belief that *hara* is the locus of life and character.

According to the so called *pars pro toto* rule the word meaning soul can stand in stead of the word meaning the individual. It is so in the Japanese as well: in most expressions it is *ki* (soul) not the individual, that is the subject of the statement. When a person is patient, it is not *he* but the *ki* (in him) that is long. When an individual feels depressed it is not *he* but *ki* that sinks. It means: people think of soul as the most important part of an individual; you can identify someone with his or her soul.

(See for more information on the topic: BOHANNAN-GLAZER 1997: 210; 220. DAHLKE 1998: 35; DETHLEFSEN-DAHLKE 1994: 123 and 125-130; DOPPELFELD 1998/1: 14-16 and 59; DOPPELFELD 1998/2: 80; FONTANA: 1995: 109; FRANZ 1995: 171; GOATLY 1997: 48-49; GRODDECK 25-27; HORVÁTH 1993; HORVÁTH 1997: 73; JANKOVICS 1996: 113-121; JELENITS 1989: 279-80; JUNG 1997: 8-17 and 108; LAKOFF –JOHNSON: 1999: 7; MARCEL 1988: 66; O. NAGY 1979: 201; NEMESHEGYI 1997: 6; PAIS 1975: 192-193; PÉTER 1991: 62; SAPIR 1971; SZILÁGYI N. 1997: 8 and 28; TIMMONS – LEY 1994: 82; TRINGER 1994: 184; TURAI 1996: 117 etc.)

Some closing remarks

It is seemed to be fact that in numerous cultures spirituality and breathing are somehow very close to each other. Breathing connects us with each other and – getting air – also with the spiritual world. We are not able to live without air, we cannot live without spirituality. Allergy is one of the most often diseases of our age. Allergic reactions of patients can be studied not only from the point of view of allergology but it can be also useful to understand the symbolic meanings of different respiratory troubles. Symptoms can be analyse as indirect, nonverbal manifestations of patterns, (beeing in a special relationship with the disease) characteristic to the patient. One possible alternative to do this – besides psychoanalysis, analysing acient myths, legends and fairy tales etc. - is the way of linguistics. I hope I could show you some relevant linguistic data on this topic showing we still have the knowledge not only in our divine books, but in the language, our everyday metaphors and symbols as well.

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