

Spiritual Images emerging in Psychotherapy Process —beyond religious affiliation

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心理療法過程で現れるスピリチュアルイメージ—宗派を超えて

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ABSTRACT

As an integrative psychotherapist, I have observed amongst my clients, and in I myself, the identification with spiritual images, which may emerge from within or discovered in the outside world. Such images may prove helpful when dealing with psychological pain aching as media through which one may sense positive energy, or a means of channeling messages which connect to “God” as the source of universe and life, or “True Self” through which you may discover a way forward to overcome the pain and realize a form of spirituality in everyday life.

Though historically, spirituality seems to be attained amongst religious believers, you can experience spiritual images or become spiritual without committing to any particular religious rites and without believing in religious dogmas which is reinforced by community egoism. Therefore, I discriminate between the word “religion” and “spirituality” here, a distinction which is not uncommon these days. Hansen (1997) wrote “It is important to distinguish spirituality from religion. *Religion* usually refers to organized religion and engagement in beliefs and practices through church, temple, synagogue, and so on. In contrast, although *spirituality* may refer to beliefs and worldview, it does not necessarily imply any organized religion.” This stance is connected to the movement called “SBNR” (spiritual but not religious) or SBNA (Spiritual but not affiliated).

This movement has been supported by the people who feel restrained by the religion of their family or community. In Japan there are also people who struggle to be independent from the religion of their families, but generally speaking, Japanese culture is freer than say Western cultures from religious affiliation. Many young couples marry at a Christian church, take their children to the Shinto shrine when they are 3, 5 or 7. And they have funeral for their parents at a Buddhist temple. They enjoy Christmas parties and they visit Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines without any inner hesitation. Therefore, it could be easier for Japanese to experience spiritual images or even to be spiritual without having conflict with any affiliation of religion.

In this paper I present several Japanese cases in which clients had experienced such spiritual images and seemed to overcome the painful situation at some extent, though of course they could not extinguish all the pain and frustration in life. The following discussion examines the possibilities opened up by psychotherapy to become spiritual without religious affiliation.

Key words : Psychotherapy, Spirituality, SBNR, SBNA, affiliation, Japanese attitude toward religion, Individual Ought, community egoism

要 旨

筆者は、統合的心理療法を実践しているが、近年、クライアントの見る夢や作成する箱庭にスピリチュアルなイメージが現れるケースに出会うことが多くなった。このようなイメージとの相互作用は、心理的苦痛の軽減に役立つことがある。このようなイメージの多くは、宇宙や生命の根源と感じられる「神」あるいは「真の自己」から届けられるエネルギーやメッセージを伝える媒体として捉えることができる。

歴史的には、スピリチュアリティは宗教を信仰する人々の一部によって体現されると考えられてきたが、こうした宗教的な教義や儀式に捕らわれずに、こうしたイメージを体験することによって、スピリチュアリティを体現する人もいる。そこで、本論文では、宗教とスピリチュアリティを区別して論じることにしたい。このような認識を持つ人々の一人であるハンセン (Hansen, 1997) は、「スピリチュアリティと宗教を区別することが大切だ。通常、宗教と

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いう言葉は組織化された宗教を意味し、教会や寺社などで宗教活動を行う。一方、スピリチュアリティは、信仰や世界観に関連し、組織的宗教活動を必ずしも伴わない」と述べている。このような価値観を持つ人々は、近年、増加しつつあり、SBNR (spiritual but not religious)、ないし、SBNA (spiritual but not affiliated) と呼ばれている。

このような志向性は、親の所属する宗教団体の束縛から逃れようとする人によく見られる。日本でもそういう人はいるが、日本では、こうした縛りはそれほど強くなく、たとえば、キリスト教会で結婚式を挙げ、子どもを七五三で神社に連れて行き、親の葬式は寺で行ったとしても、それほど葛藤を感じない人も多い。

そこで、本論文では、心理療法において、宗派に捕らわれないスピリチュアルなイメージが表現され、そのような表現活動を通して、クライアントが進むべき道を見出し、心理的苦痛を克服していった日本人のケースをいくつかあげて、心理療法とスピリチュアリティの関連について論じる。

Forward

I have been an integrative psychotherapist for over 40 years in Japan. I was trained mainly by Jungian therapists, so I practice dream-analysis or sand-play in my sessions. However, I accept the Freudian hypothesis that most symptoms and problematic behaviors stem from traumatic experience and its recurring image (recall or anticipation). I also owe much to Rogerian theory and practice. The essence of my approach resonates with his principles: trying to be genuine and to share the suffering of my clients without blaming her/his emotion or thinking. Though I respect these approaches, I don't accept the Freudian dogma that every neurotic patient has unconscious sexual trauma, nor practice Jung's technique of active imagination, and never felt that I satisfy Roger's three conditions fully. I sometimes adopt Morita theory, using cognitive-behavioral explanation, and recommend mindful skills to my clients.

I estimate half of my clients feel alleviated of their distress through the recognition that their psychological pain is understood and shared, following which they naturally take their own path in the situation. Yet, other clients often ask me, after sharing their difficulties, what they should do in the present situation. Not like many Jungian or Rogerian, I often offer some options and ask my clients to consider which one is suitable for them. If the client chooses one option, I ask the client to tell me if it worked or not at the next session.

However, I have to confess that on some cases the client and I even cannot think of effective measures at all. The situation looks so dire and we become silent. It is often at this moment that some spiritual images emerge in our psyche. I present some examples.

Case Presentation*

1. Kei's parents

This was the first impressive case which brought my attention to the importance of spiritual images

during psychotherapy. The tragedy happened at a primary school. One villain intruded into the school and murdered several young children including Kei. I was a clinical psychologist working at the nearby university and I was called as a counselor for the parents.

This counseling was facilitated through an outreach approach. The counselor visited the homes of the bereaved families frequently just after the incident and later once a week or month, for more than several years in some cases.

Every time I visited the parents of Kei, first I faced the altar and offered prayers saying in my mind "I have come to visit you again. Please tell me anything you want to say to me." After the session was over, I would return to the altar, offering prayers, saying "I'll see you again," and then left the house.

One day Kei's mother was so overwhelmed by her grief that she even thought of committing suicide. I felt helpless and talked to the Kei's spirit that "Your mother says like this". Then Kei spoke to me "Tell her that no more lives sacrificed. I'll wait for you Mom in heaven." When I conveyed this to Kei's mother, she shed tears and seemed to refrain from the contemplation. I was sure that we could feel the soul of Kei so vividly here, but this experience was never affected by some religious sect.

Some months later, Kei's father had a dream as below (some sentences translated by Mark Unno)

...I was riding the subway with my wife. It was pitch black, but the passengers were calm. When it became light and the train stopped at a station, I saw Kei was playing outside in a field with other children. "Kei looks happy," I said to my wife, but I didn't call out to Kei, maybe because I was just so glad to see him even from a distance. However, when it was time for the subway to leave, I eagerly wished to hear Kei's voice. I tried to use the cell phone, but it was out of reception range! Then I waved my hand to my child, when Kei noticed me and waved me back vigorously. I was afraid that it would be the last chance to see him, though I felt I could say final goodbye to him...

This dream reminded me of *The Night of the Milky Way Railroad* by Kenji Miyazawa (1896~1933). This is the story of a boy named Giovanni who was riding on the train in his dream only to find his friend Campanella near his seat. Later Giovanni was told that Campanella had drowned whilst saving a boy from the river. This was the train to heaven.

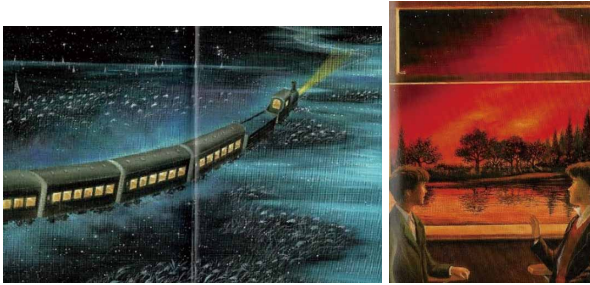


Fig. 1-1 Train to heaven

In this train, the victims of the Titanic accident were also riding. They got off at a station where a big cross was standing. And there came forward a man in white cloth with his hand open, and the victims were moving toward the cross with cheer.



Fig. 1-2 Victims of Titanic accident

Story by Kenji Miyazawa, Picture by Tazuko Tahara, (2000). *Ginga tetsudo no yoru* (The Night of a Milky Way Railroad). Kaisei Publishers.

Kenji Miyazawa was an enthusiastic Buddhist. However, from this scene, we can realize Miyazawa's honest respect for Christianity. I can say he was a man of spirituality free from any affiliation. Kei's father had not read this story and he was not Christian nor Buddhist, but it was clear that he had the spiritual image of his child and heaven high above. (Kenji's story also reflects his mourning work of his sister Toshi). Therefore, I was sure that that the spiritual images like soul or heaven help the people to accept the tragic pain without any special religious affiliation.

2. Clay works in my class

Next, I present two clay works of my students.

The first one was made by an old lady. She was told by her doctor that she only had one year left of life. She was deeply hurt but she decided to take my class, which would be held one year later from this date. When I met her, she looked rather healthy but of course had not been cured. After the session, she confessed to us her situation and told that this class was what she really needed at this university.



Fig. 2-1 Buds emerging from snow land

After finishing her creation, she explained her work. The white base is a snow field and the sun light fall on the right yellow side, where some buds of green plants are emerging. Life is born even under the snow. Participants were deeply moved, and all encircled her in a hug.

Another one is made by a young lady and the title was "Being born" (Kuramitsu, 2019).



Fig. 2-2 Being born

This lady said something round is rising up from the base. She was a little anxious about future of this small ball just born. I said imagining a drop of milk "What goes up must come down. Spinning round like a spinning wheel". Then she said she felt reassured.

These two works are not human-shape figures but still have some spiritual impact : the origin of life. I can say it is not rare for Japanese to feel something great even in such tiny natural phenomena. For us those could be spiritual figures, too.

3. Sand-play works

I present here the successions of sand-play works made by two male adolescents. They used various spiritual or religious objects.

Taro

Taro had a difficulty to catch up with the class and was depressive. He had been absent from his university more than a year and was at the risk of dropping out. This is the first sand-play work he made.



Fig. 3-1-1 Resting hut on the way to go left (some of following pictures of Taro are first presented on Kuramitsu, 2008)

In this sand-play, the animals moved from right to left which sometimes represent the inner movement from outside to inside, or from society to home. There is a small resting hut (tea-room) on the way, which could symbolize my counseling room. The red bridge is often set on the pond of a Japanese shrine which connects this world and another.



Fig. 3-1-2 A giraffe on a high building near the temple

At the next session, he made the work of a giraffe on a high building, who cannot move freely. This building may represent the high-level university, and the giraffe on the top may represent his crisis. And there is a tiger under the tree that may attack him. Yet, you see a Buddhist temple between the building and the tiger.



Fig. 3-1-3 Buddha and a panda in a pond

In the next work, there emerged Buddha in a pond and near him a small panda on a boat. I felt this composition looks like our counseling room where clients come and get rest for a while. And a duck on dinosaur also may represent the client who clings on to the reliable therapist.



Fig. 3-1-4 The panda and an old man talking at the hot spring

You see in this sand-play the panda and an old man are talking in the hot spring (there is a small pail and a towel), that reminds me of his previous work. Now, Taro and the therapist (instead of Buddha) are talking face to face. The sign near the hot spring seemed to indicate two directions, to proceed the course of university or to go back home.



Fig. 3-1-5 The panda prays to a shrine

Later, he made a sand-play work where the panda prays to the Japanese gods in a shrine. Near panda there waits a white bear who looks like a guard of this spiritual zone.



Fig. 3-1-6 Kangaroos on the cloud may fall down but there waits rescue team with a stretcher

The next sand-play work expressed kangaroos balance upon unstable clouds. They might fall down but there waits a rescue team with a stretcher. There is a man praying and a raccoon looking above who may represent the client and the therapist. This work suggests that he would be saved even if he dropped out of the university.



Fig. 3-1-7 A kangaroo was saved on stretcher

And yes, a kangaroo was brought to rescue through the arch of a rainbow in a session several months later.



Fig. 3-1-8 Giraffes passing bridges from left to right

During this critical period, he decided to leave the university. In the sand-play work, giraffes are going to pass the bridges from left to right. I guess this movement reflects his journey from dangerous field to peaceful land.



Fig. 3-1-9 A giraffe moved to the center of mandala

Then a giraffe reached the center of mandala shape. Mandala is said to be a symbol of Self (by Jung) or stable phase after transition.

Some months later he found a good job in his hometown, and according to the letters, he has been living a more peaceful life with his family.

Jiro

Jiro came to my counseling room when a person he adored had left him. It was experienced like a heart-break.



Fig. 3-2-1 Jiro's Journey from left to right

He made a sand-play work where a ship moves from left to right, which may reflect the inner journey from the past to the future.



Fig. 3-2-2 Mary, church and the graveyard

On the way, he visited a church, a statue of Mary stands on the right side, but in his imagination, Mary was inside the church.

On the left side, he said someone was buried, so he placed some flowers for her. I felt this grave might represent the psychological death of his important person.



Fig. 3-2-3 Two couples of mother and child, while the Little Prince looking at the situation from the tree

A month later, Jiro made a sand-play where two couples of mother and child meet together. “The Little Prince” on a tree watching them. I feel here basic “mother and child reunion” was established again, under the warm spiritual regard.



Fig. 3-2-4 Two religious zone first connected then divided

The next figure of his work (**Fig. 3-2-4**) shocked me. He divided the world right and left. On the left,

there stands a Christian cross, and on the right, a Japanese shrine with a red gate and a small Buddha statue. Then he put the red bridge crossing the river which connected two worlds, but to my surprise, he took the bridge away a few minutes later, saying “Not yet”.

I had been imagining if there could be the peaceful bond between Christianity and Buddhism, but at that time our inner voice might suggested that “The time has not come yet”.



Fig. 3-2-5 Visible and invisible world

Jiro commented that the next sand-play (**Fig. 3-2-5**) had a deep connotation. He commented that there is a visible and invisible world. In the left space you see the real room with a TV. But no one knows that there is a small TV in the big TV set. Special waves come from red tower and this small TV catches the waves from the tower, but no one is aware of that. And if the person in the room opens the door to the outside, the world of the tower and the woods disappear. He realized the fact that the source of waves is invisible though it conveys some message to us.



Fig. 3-2-6 Mandala shape desert and the central well

Some weeks later, he made a mandala shape desert, and at the center he placed a well which looked very deep.



Fig. 3-2-7 A precious coin
at the bottom of the sea

At the next session, he made the bottom of the deep sea (which looks like the well above), where lied one precious coin. As the sea is so deep human being can not find it, while fishes can see it, but it is worthless for them. We realized again that there is an invisible world.

Two years later he found a new important person and fell in love with her. He married her and they had a child. I feel he has experienced through this journey, something precious though invisible, which may be identified as spiritual, too.

3-3. Discussion

3-3-1. Origin of religion

When we think of religion, we often search for its origin in human history. Japanese biblical scholar Tsukimoto (2017) said “The human activity called “religion”, almost without exception, premises the invisible world which surpasses our daily life”. “It is the common feature among so called primitive forms of religion, from animism to shamanism, or religions developed in ancient civilizations from India/Iran to Greek/Roman” (translated by Kuramitsu).

In very ancient days, around the era when people invented language and various tools, they must have used various tools and began to feel that they could control the environment to some extent. This recognition might have created the sense of their own “subjectivity”. However, they must have also confronted tremendous limitation coupled with the feeling of complete powerlessness, especially when they had painful experiences like disasters, accidents, diseases, defeats and so on. And it is very likely that in such a situation, the image of god might emerge in their mind.

And it is also very likely that when people feel very lucky as they got much food, won the war, got a lover and had many children, they also thought it was brought by God.

Thus, you can say that God is believed to be “Super Subject” who had given birth to this world and every creature, and could control everyone’s destiny. Some people must have felt its real existence. They might have claimed that they could see the vision or hear the voice of gods (medium of God) somewhere in reality or in their dream. And some of them insisted that when they did specific actions, this would lead to good/bad consequences, the result of god’s will. Once such experience or belief was accepted in the community, it could become a religion with a set of rituals and dogmas. Communities deified those who insisted to have had such experiences, and there emerged the messenger of god ; priests. People believed that god or deified persons may give them fortune and remove pain if they followed certain rituals or dogmas. They made the house for the gods and priests, offered food and drink, human sacrifices, even virgins because they imagined gods to have similar desire as human-being. People also came to think of the life after death and the life before the birth. Therefore, they made tombs, invented rituals and held festivals for their ancestors or gods.

3-3-2. Religion and spirituality

William James (1917) defined the religion as “*The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*” Also John Hick (1985) described in his book about “Problems of Religious Pluralism” that “*Real an sich is one but is nevertheless capable of being humanly experienced in a variety of ways*”. And Japanese Buddhist Daisetz Suzuki (1944) says in his book “Japanese Spirituality”; “*Man simply receives the Infinite Light of Great Compassion.*” He referred to Saichi Asahara as an example of spiritual man who had accepted everything like the presents from Amida-Butsu (Buddha ; absolute one).

If you recall Jesus or Gautama, Rutter or Shinran, you can find that they are independent from the rituals or dogmas of the prevailing religion at the period. They talked about the truth and persuaded the people to do the right thing and to be a good person. These people must be really spiritual. I believe they did not regard themselves as god, rather the follower deified them. It was the follower, not spiritual person who established religious community, rituals and dogmas. I also believe that such spiritual person would never commit murder, torture and so on like followers even at the period of war led by community egoism.

3-3-3. Psychotherapy and Spirituality

Long years have passed since the word “God” was invented, and only one hundred years or so since the activity of so-called “scientific” psychotherapy emerged, but in modern society a lot of people already have noticed that there is no evidence that religious rituals are effective, nor dogmas are rational. And some of them come to regard the religions just as superstitions.

Nowadays most of the people recognize that science works very well on the field of objective materials. And most of psychologists insist that psychology is a science. Their model is physics and some may lose philosophy. Such psychologists treat the mind or spirit as if it were an object. Of course, the body is made of materials, and the mind is deeply dependent on the functions of the brain, so the law of causality is effective to some extent in this field.

Yet, psychic phenomena can never be seized like physical materials. Mind is not body. We can't measure precisely the level of wisdom, love, motivation or spirituality. Subjects are not objects. We are not robots but human beings. We feel we have freedom to decide the next action or behavior, though machine or robot never has its will, I believe. They work automatically following the law of cause and effect.

Psychotherapy is an interaction of at least two subjects so that we can't anticipate other's behavior precisely.

Within psychotherapy in which spirituality is treated, clients often have dialogue with spiritual figures such as Jesus or Gautama, Mary or Kannon, saint or guru, lost family or ancestors, mountains or springs, sun or stars, buds or water-drops and so on. And in some case such images could be projected onto therapist.

Life is composed of rather stable phases and unstable phases, though any phase is changing instant by instant. You can interpret the unstable phase as a transitional period and the ultimate stable phase as Satori or life in heaven.

Most of the clients had experienced severe conflicts or frustrations, and become unstable. Then they wonder what to do or where to go. Such situations are reflected in your dreams or sand-play, pictures or stories, poems or music. For example, you can remember the unstable situation of Taro which could be expressed as a giraffe on the high building or Kangaroos on cloud in the sky, a panda on a small boat, a duck on a dinosaur. In such unstable situations, you may need someone you can trust. In the sand-play work of Taro, you can remember Buddha or an old man, and in the work of Jiro, Mary, the couple of

mother and child, or the Little Prince. And in the following sessions sometimes a stable phase is expressed by mandala.

Through such spiritual medias emerging in the dreams or sand-play works and so on, you may feel the love of, and may hear the voice of God or True Self. Then you may find something you feel you ought to do in your life. I call it “Individual Ought”, which differs from person to person, time to time, and at special occasions they may not be in line with the rules or tradition of your community, the expectations of your boss or parents. Yet, you will be convinced, that it is your Individual Ought.

Most of the psychological problems stem from severe dissatisfaction of basic needs, but the practice of Individual Ought satisfies your higher needs, so it often contributes to overcoming of the problems.

The spiritual medias could also take the form of high mountains, clear springs, the rising sun, shining stars, babies or buds, animals or plants. Some media are felt spiritual for one, but other's media sometimes look incomprehensible or peculiar. (Fig. 3-3-1)

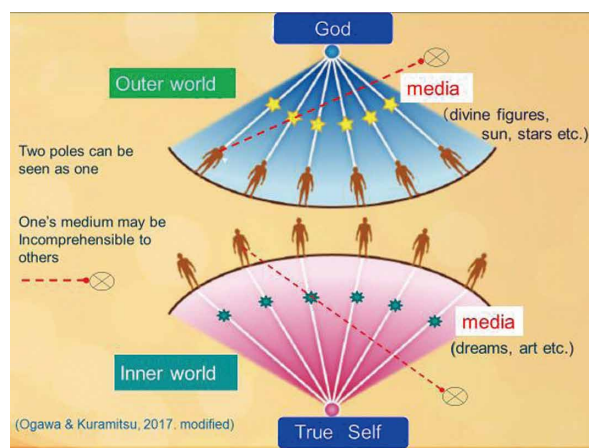


Fig. 3-3-1 God or True-Self, and the spiritual medias (through medias individuals can feel the positive energy and find “Individual Ought” from these poles) (Kuramitsu, 2017, 2020. modified.)

To be spiritual like saints is very difficult (impossible for me), but to interact with such spiritual media could be rather familiar. God or True Self is invisible and far away, but spiritual images or medias could be seen or heard and be felt very close, which is free from any religious affiliation. Even a person who has experienced traumatic events could receive the energy and messages from such resources through various medias including therapists and counselors on some occasions.

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- * I have presented some of these ideas at the annual conference of Society for the Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration (SEPI) 2017.

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