CHAPTER FOUR

SUBTLE ANATOMY:
THE BIO-METAPHYSICS OF ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

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The physical body of flesh, viscera and membrane is not the only ‘body’ towards which alternative therapies focus their intervention. There is another body—the subtle body—common to many types of alternative therapies that is understood to be the locus where healing takes place. Although subtle bodies are variously conceptualised (informed by diverse religious and spiritual traditions) in general this ‘body’ is understood to be ontologically energetic, nebulous and invisible. Such subtle anatomy is ‘worked with’ by spiritual healers, energetic healers, herbalists, traditional Chinese medical practitioners, medical intuitives, Reiki healers, Tai Chi and Yoga practitioners to name but a few of the healing modalities which utilise various subtle body schemas in their treatments.

This chapter’s specific focus will be on considering the subtle body as an embodied interface between the metaphysical and the physical: as bio-metaphysical. Elsewhere I have considered the philosophical—especially ontological and ethical—ramifications of the subtle body as a model of subjectivity.1 Subtle bodies blur clear boundaries between ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’, and indeed their very conceptualisation can be understood as disrupting the type of binary logic that sharply distinguishes the physical from metaphysical, matter from spirit, the self from concepts of the divine, I from Other. In exploring the role of the subtle body as bio-metaphysical, two forms of subtle anatomy will be considered: firstly, subtle bodies as found in spiritual healing, especially those practices informed by Spiritualism, and secondly, the networks

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of energetic meridians in traditional Chinese medicine, especially as utilised in acupuncture treatments.

Known by many names, for example, subtle body, esoteric anatomy, sidereal body, etheric body, suksma sharira, concepts of the subtle body exist in various forms in eastern, western and Esoteric philosophical and religious traditions. Broadly considered, subtle bodies can be divided into two types. The first is as a series of energetic sheaths or ‘bodies’ which extend beyond the physical body and interpenetrate and exceed each other (and the physical body). This is the type of subtle body found in Spiritualist and modern Theosophical traditions. The second type is that of esoteric anatomy, wherein individual organs have energetic subtle matter counterparts and/or the body has an internal series of pathways along which subtle energy travels, as in traditional Chinese medicine. Of course, both types of subtle anatomy can exist together, as in Yoga and Tantra versions.

The type of subtle body ‘used’ by spiritual healers has its source in both the adaptation of Hindu and Buddhist concepts of subtle bodies by the Modern Theosophical Society, which have been carried into New Age beliefs and practices and also, the already existing models of the subtle body in the west, for example the sidereal (or star) body of fifteenth century physician Paracelsus. The subtle body in Theosophical accounts is a series of energetic sheaths that extend beyond the physical body (and are roughly the same form as the physical body). Each ‘body’ is presented as being comprised of both matter and consciousness (or spirit) to various degrees. That is, these subtle bodies are neither thought to be purely metaphysical or purely physical, but

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3 Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim), c. 1494–1541, proposed in Opus Paragranum (1531) four pillars of medicine: Astronomia, Philosophia, Alchimia and Virtus (the physicians). Paracelsus believed that celestial bodies could effect the physical body and were a significant cause of disease. In addition, he proposed the human to be comprised of two bodies, one the visible body of matter, the other the invisible body, which was intimately related to the stars. Udo Benzenhöfer and Urs Leo Gantenbein, ‘Paracelsus’, in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelef Van Den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach (eds.), Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006, pp. 922–31. See also: Heinrich Schipperges, ‘Paracelsus and his followers,’ in Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (eds.), Modern Esoteric Spirituality: World Spirituality An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, vol. 21, New York: Crossroad, 1995, pp. 154–85.