

# Morphogenetic Fields and Akasha

A conversation between Dr. Rupert Sheldrake, Dora Kunz,  
Dr. Renee Weber, and Will Ross

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## Introduction

*Dr. Rupert Sheldrake, author of A New Science of Life, explained the basic concept of his theory. Besides the already known fields of science, such as the gravitational fields, Sheldrake has hypothesized morphogenetic fields or M-fields. He says these fields are invisible organizing structures that mould or shape things like crystals, plants and animals, and also have an organizing effect on behaviour. In other words, this field becomes a kind of blueprint that regulates and organizes subsequent units of the same type. Subsequent units “tune” into (or “resonate” with), and then repeat, the previously created “archetype” which can operate across time and space. Stated another way, as each new unit is formed and shaped, it reinforces the M-field and the “habit” is established. This theory extends all the way from molecular crystals to complex living organisms. An important point is that it becomes progressively easier and faster for subsequent units of whatever species we are discussing to adopt the structure. Eventually, the structure appears inherent and virtually changeless.*

*Sheldrake first discussed the conventional genetics programming and DNA doctrine. According to this, the way in which organisms develop is somehow “programmed” into their DNA. He then argued that DNA indeed codes the sequence for amino acids, which form protein. But from the M-field standpoint, the form and organization of cells, tissues, organs, and organisms as a whole are governed by a hierarchy of morphogenic fields that are not inherited chemically but are, instead, given directly by morphic resonance from past organisms of the same species.*

*To clarify this idea Dr. Sheldrake used the analogy of a television set. Imagine a person who knows nothing about electricity. He is shown a television set for the first time. He might at first think that the set actually contains little people, whose images appear on the screen. But after looking inside and finding only wires and transistors, he might hypothesize that the images somehow arise from complicated interactions among the components of the set. This theory would seem particularly plausible in light of the fact that the images become distorted or disappear when components are removed. If it were then suggested that the images in fact depend upon invisible influences entering the set from far away, he might reject it. His theory that nothing comes into the set from the outside would be reinforced by the discovery that the set weighs the same whether turned “on” or “off”.*

*This point of view may resemble the conventional approach to biology, where wires, transistors, etc., correspond to DNA protein molecules, etc. Sheldrake agrees that genetic changes can affect the inheritance of form or instinct by altering the “tuning” or by introducing distortions into the “reception”. But genetic factors by themselves cannot fully account for the inheritance of form and instinct, any more than the particular pictures on the screen of a TV set can be explained in terms of its wiring diagram alone.*

*Because, in Sheldrake’s view, the human nervous system is also governed by M-fields, the same principle would hold true for human beings. This would have great implications for our understanding of how and why people learn. Learning of this kind would thus be a kind of basic species inheritance, more or less automatically “remembered”. It would not be located in the*

*individual brain at all, but given directly from species structure through morphic resonance. The cumulative experiences of humankind would thus indeed include the archetypal forms described by Jung.*

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**Dora Kunz:** The question under discussion is whether there is any relationship between the concept of morphogenetic fields and Akasha. According to my understanding of M-fields, memory plays an important part in the concept, and I wonder if that might be a possible link with the concept of Akasha. Perhaps we could begin by defining the M-fields, and then discuss the role of memory.

**Rupert Sheldrake:** M-fields are form-shaping fields: *morpho* – form, *genesis* – coming into being. They are fields concerned with the coming into being of form, and they are responsible for shaping and ordering systems of all levels of complexity – atoms, molecules, crystals, cells, organs, and organisms. The structure of morphogenetic fields is given by the actual forms of previous systems, by means of morphic resonance, the process by which like acts upon like. Morphic resonance means the M-fields contain, as it were, a crude or collective memory – the species – which is inherent to the field.

The idea of a memory that accumulates through time is essential to this concept. As I understand the idea of Akasha it includes a kind of memory of everything that happens, but it is not clear to me whether the Akashic record is thought of as a kind of gigantic memory bank. If it is thought of in that way, there is the question of how any given organism; a rabbit for instance, can retrieve information from the memory bank of the Akashic record. Normally, in order to retrieve memory from a library or an information bank, it is necessary to know how to obtain access to a particular memory. I think that it happens through morphic resonance, the tuning of like to like. If the Akashic record is a sort of generalized, nonspecific memory bank, the question is, how can you get anything out of it? If it comes out on the basis of similarity to what went in, however, then the idea of the Akashic record is similar to morphic resonance. What this means is that there is a direct link from a thing in the past to a similar thing here in the present, the only difference being that the Akashic record is the storage device.

**D.K.** Perhaps we should consider what the word *Akasha* means in Indian philosophy, because there is a difference.

**Renee Weber:** it is associated in Indian philosophy with space – that which radiates in all directions. The idea of Akasha is, first of all, associated with sound as a primary Element. This fundamental relationship of Akasha with sound not only establishes resonance as a primary factor in the development of the senses, but also in the development of form. This is implied in the Biblical statement, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was from God.” Sound connects with vibration and what is interesting is that the theory of morphic resonance requires a kind of attunement of vibratory similarity. So in that sense there would be another link between morphic resonance and Akasha.

**R.S.** Presumably Akasha means space, and if so, something in space, a rabbit for instance, is vibrating: it is breathing, its heart is beating, it is twitching its ears, and so on. It is moving in many different ways; it is not a static form. Since this whole pattern of activity of the rabbit is occurring in space, which is also on Akasha, perhaps the Akasha is being imprinted with that form and that pattern of vibrations in the place where the rabbit is.

**R.W.** The only part that worries me is when you say “in the place where the rabbit is.” Do you think that Akasha, being a field, is so strictly tied in with locality?

**R.S.** Well, fields have a dual nature. One aspect is that they are extended, and the other is that they are related to localities. If Akasha means space, and the rabbit is in a particular place in space, this must mean a modification of the Akashic field in that space. Similarly, the gravitational field is extended through the whole universe, but it is highly modified in the presence of matter. The gravitational field around the earth is different from what it would be in the middle of intergalactic space, precisely because the earth is here.

**R.W.** Yes, the Akasha has to be modified by the presence of matter if it is to be capable of recording anything.

**R.S.** I am going to shift our focus for a minute. As I think of other fields, other planes of nature, such as the emotional field (you used the word “astral” field) or the conceptual or mental field, it appears that they have their own characteristics which the organisms display, but in turn the organisms also affect the field. If at a given place in the emotional field there is a lot of violence, the emotional field at the moment stores or amplifies it. There is a replay back and forth. In other words, we take on the characteristics of the field, but it also is amplified by our thoughts and feelings. Would Akasha work in a similar way?

**D.K.** I suppose if we talk about space and relate it to fields, Akasha would encompass all of the fields, even the gravitational.

**R.S.** I presume so. I don’t think it would be meaningful to say that the gravitational field is the same as Akasha.

**D.K.** It can’t be. Would it be a component of it?

**R.S.** You see, I don’t know exactly what the Akasha is. We are trying to discover what it is. One possibility is that it is a kind of field of fields; a field which includes all others. If the Akashic field is the field of all possible kinds of space, including the space that is curved by the gravitational field, that which is modified by the electromagnetic field, the space that is affected by thoughts and emotions, the internal space of consciousness – all possible kinds of space that there are, physical, mental, emotional, and intentional – then it would be a kind of field of fields which would include all other fields.

I also like the theosophical idea of the group soul. You see, I am not sure that I believe that we are reincarnated. I think it may happen occasionally to some people, but not as a general rule. I’m afraid that I have a heterodox view. I think we are influenced by a large number of influences from past lives through, for example, the collective unconscious, but not that there is necessarily a one-to-one relationship. I have no way of knowing, for example, that I was an Indian peasant five hundred years ago, and a Greek fisherman before that, and so on. Having no experience of previous lives, I do not see any reason why we have to assume that there has been such a direct one-to-one connection, rather than multiple influences working from past lives of people now dead. If I am influenced by hundreds, thousands, millions of people in the past, in one sense I am all those people reincarnated. I realize that the usual theory of reincarnation is that each of us is born in a sequence of linear births in time, but I don’t see any reason to believe it myself.

**R.W.** As we have not defined Akasha, but circumscribed it, I would like to ask if it is in the phenomenal world.

**R.S.** We are suggesting that it is the ground of phenomena; that all phenomena must occur as appearances within space. Even hallucinations or dreams are phenomena within some kind of space. In dreams we can move around, see people, and so on.

**D.K.** I suppose hallucinations occur within the space of the mind.

**R.S.** Yes. I am defining the space of the mind as a kind of space. The Tibetans talk about the continuity between the space of the mind and physical space. I am delighted with the Tibetan concept of space for, as I understand it, there is a similarity, indeed an analogy, between mental space and physical space. They don't separate the two in the way that we are used to. Since Akasha is part of Eastern thought, it seems necessary to include mental space with Akasha. Therefore all appearances – even hallucinations – occur within Akasha.

But even if we take the physical universe alone, there is a sense in which consciousness ranges through it. Now that we have theories about stars being in distant galaxies, and measurements of the red shift and the spectral lines and the receding universe, the very fact that we can look at stars through telescopes and say that they are a million or a thousand light years away means that consciousness is ranging through space and creating this vast universe. You may say that the universe is there independently of our consciousness. But we do have a growing consciousness of a universe, infinitely vaster than it appeared to people a few thousand years ago. So in a sense when we study distant galaxies our consciousness is ranging through space.

**R.W.** In fact, it has been observed that many people who are not mystics but just ordinary people actually experience a sense of expanded consciousness by looking out into the heavens and seeing this limitless sky, which seems to be not just a symbol but a real experience of the expansiveness of space.

**Will Ross:** *The Theosophical Glossary* defines Akasha in this way: “The subtle, supersensuous spiritual essence which pervades all space; the primordial substance .... It is to Ether what Spirit is to Matter, or Atma to Kama-rupa. It is, in fact, the Universal Space in which radiates the First Logos, or expressed thought. This is why it is stated in the Puranas that Akasha has but one attribute, namely sound, for sound is but the translated symbol of Logos – ‘Speech’ in its mystic sense ...”

**D.K.** I should like now to ask how Akasha, according to this definition, is related to the M-fields?

**R.S.** If we define Akasha as the space within which all possible forms and appearances come into being, subjective and objective, physical and mental; then clearly everything that happens in terms of form, whether mental or physical, must be within Akasha. There is nothing that can be outside it, by definition. All physical fields like the gravitational and electromagnetic fields must be within the Akashic field. Therefore the M-field must be embedded within the Akashic field.

**W.R.** I think Akasha might be the total background, but I don't think it is at all synonymous with a field as commonly understood.

**R.S.** I was thinking of it as a kind of field of fields. A field is continuous extension in space, according to modern physics, and as such fills all space.

**D.K.** Because Akasha relates to space and the fields are in space, Will thinks of it as the all-encompassing background, whereas you think of it as an all-encompassing field.

**R.S.** Let me ask Will how he sees the background working. If the background is modified by that which is within it, then it has to take on form, pattern, and differentiation. Now the universal space or background exists all through the universe, including where I am sitting right here. Therefore, the presence and form of my body must be affecting Akasha, and consequently it must undergo a kind of modification as a result of my being here.

**W.R.** I assume that all manifested things undergo modification. This is the essence of manifestation, isn't it?

**R.S.** So insofar as Akasha is manifest, it would undergo modification.

**W.R.** That's right.

**R.S.** So you think of it not as an undifferentiated background of manifestation but rather as something which is included in all manifestation.

**W.R.** Yes, I think modifications take place in something, and that is Akasha.

**R.S.** In that sense we could describe it as a field, because a field is not a perfectly uniform background. A field is a spatial extension, a spatial continuum with modifications.

**W.R.** Of course, I do tend to think along those lines. Really, when Einstein was looking for a universal field, he was looking for Akasha.

**R.S.** If we say that Akasha is a kind of fundamental field, a field which includes all other fields, that would be saying much the same thing.

**D.K.** What do you think the role of the M-field is?

**R.S.** I think the role of the M-field is in the development of formal patterns of atoms, molecules, crystals, cells, tissues, organisms and also patterns of behaviour.

**R.W.** This is the part where I think the theory is not clear. I can see that its function would be developmental, but in this process an important step is missing: How does the organism arise in the first place? Once you have the organism, the M-field's role becomes clear. But the field does not provide the original information for the organism to know what it is to be, so that it can then feed it back to the field. The question that keeps coming up over and over is what is its function except as a kind of replicator? It is not the originator of the forms.

**R.S.** With reference to the organism, if we take any particular species, say chickens, there are millions of hens developing this very minute all over the world from eggs. The tuning system is the hen's egg; it is what the chicks are coming from. The chick comes from the egg and the egg comes from the hen; both are part of an ongoing system. Insofar as the M-field is accounting for repetition, the problem is associated with the first of any species. Now the vast majority of organisms we see around us are of course not the first of their species. In fact, I doubt if any of us has ever seen the first of a species. So this theory is able to account for the vast majority of cases of morphogenesis.

Now the question of where the first ones come from involves the appearance of a new field within Akasha. When we ask; what is the ground of this new field? Where does it come from? There is a wide range of possibilities. You could say that Akasha itself is the ground of the new field; give it a creative role. Then it becomes somewhat like the idea of sunyata, the creative void.

**R.W.** I think the most theosophical view would be that the form is within the matter itself, because the matter is always at the same time conscious and creative. One doesn't need to add another principle, because the whole universe is evolving and expressing itself. So the first form of any species would arise from within the system itself, and then feed back and forth perhaps in the way you have suggested.

**R.S.** To get back to the question of the function of the M-field, once the first organism of any species has appeared, the function would be to store the pattern associated with that, and then feed it back and forth. You could say it becomes like a giant thought form.

**W.R.** It becomes a feedback system.

**R.S.** The essential feature of M-fields is this feedback element. The reason they differ from the Platonic archetypes, for example, is that the archetypes are regarded as completely fixed. They have always been; they always will be. The Platonic archetypes are imperfectly reflected in the changing forms of the world. It is a one-way relationship, because what happens in the world is a matter of indifference to the archetypes. One could say that the Platonic archetype of a chicken existed at the moment of the Big Bang twenty billion years ago, and that it will exist in twenty billion years time when it can no longer perform any service, since chickens will have long since vanished from the earth.

**R.W.** There are two things I would like to say. First, we are not sure that Plato used the archetypes in that rigid a way; and second, is there any real difference between them and what you have described? Let us say that dinosaur M-fields are still with us. How do these differ?

**R.S.** I would say the dinosaur fields are here and now, but they didn't exist before the dinosaurs appeared. The differences between my model and the usual mechanical description (whose background is heavily Platonic) is that ordinary conventional science would say that the first time a new crystalline compound comes into being, the form is completely determined by the so-called laws of nature, the mathematical formula and so on. The laws are fixed; they are pre-existing. What I am saying is that there is a feedback process. This turns out to be experimentally testable.

**R.W.** Theosophically, there must be something of the kind, because otherwise the whole phenomenon of being-in-the-world, of development and evolution, would lose its meaning. Time feeds back on the so-called timeless. It is a multidirectional affair; there is a two-way mirror.

**W.R.** It is life which is evolving. The M-fields are concerned with the forms which that life evolves, a change in the forms which are part of the living process.

**R.W.** I suppose from what Rupert is saying that the retrieval system is connected with the pattern of vibrations and the similarity, almost like a magnet.

**R.S.** Yes, a rabbit embryo will tap into the rabbit M-field. But if we think of Akasha as including a cosmic memory, then the normal laws of memory and association etc., would automatically be taken care of. The normal ways in which we think of memory working are through things like association, contiguity, or some kind of similarity. If we smell an odour, it recalls to us circumstances associated with smelling it before, and if it was a rather unusual experience, just catching a whiff of that perfume might evoke a whole scene. If we talk of Akasha as a cosmic memory, then it would be evoked by similarity. If morphic resonance is an aspect of this, then a rabbit embryo would be rabbit-like, and an association would bring in the memory of rabbitness, rabbit form from previous rabbits – all of which

would be within the Akashic record and cosmic memory. The result would come to much the same thing, but the phenomenon would occur within a very different framework.

**W.R.** H.P. Blavatsky says in one of the commentaries on Stanza 1 in *The Secret Doctrine*, “The man strong in yoga can merge his soul with the Alaya of the universe.” This is really the memory of the whole universe and again, is the description the Buddhists use with regard to the Buddha just before he achieved Enlightenment.

**R.W.** This brings in the question of time. Don’t you think “the man strong in yoga” lives in the timeless present where everything is now?

**W.R.** No, I don’t think so. I think that as long as there is manifestation, there is time. Consciousness is a concomitant of time. But I tend to feel that time has dimensionality, and that just as we have three dimensions of space, so we probably have three dimensions of time. This would bring us a universe that is rather consistent with our seven-fold system.

I think most of us have experienced a timeless period, but of course we don’t know we are experiencing it at the moment. If you know that you are experiencing it, you are in time. This is one of the great problems. I have used the term “timeless universe” because it is a nice phrase that distinguishes it from the ordinary twenty-four hour day. According to the Stanzas, the only state in which time was not was in Pralaya.

**R.W.** But now we are talking about time from the point of view of consciousness. Anyone who steps off the wheel of samsara is no longer subject to enforced time. He can use conventional time to catch a plane, but as an inner experience time no longer grips him in the same way.

**W.R.** I thoroughly agree with this. Time doesn’t affect us in the same way. But unless we enter Pralaya, there is time in some sense.

**R.S.** Time is intrinsically related to the whole question of memory. About this timeless experience, I have nothing to say, since I have never actually experienced it. But the notion of time in the normal sense of the word is clearly intrinsic to development or memory, as well as to normal consciousness, and manifestation is clearly tied up with it. Indeed, if Akasha is related to sound or vibration, then vibration is meaningless without time. Vibration is fundamentally related to a pattern in time. So insofar as manifestation depends on the vibrational model of science, it is inevitably and necessarily within time. We have succeeded in ridding ourselves of the memory bank idea, in favour of cosmic memory. The Alaya Vijnana of the Mahayana tradition, which is a kind of cosmic memory, is presumably the source of the idea of the Akashic record, since that term does not appear in *The Secret Doctrine*.

**R.W.** Cosmic memory sounds more living, and not as dualistic. It is as if the universe itself remembers; there is no need for any objective record.

**W.R.** Don’t you think that karma is basically an expression of a relationship of man to the universe, to the cosmos? It is the principle which relates him to it in this process.

**R.S.** You see, karma can be taken both on the limited sense of human karma and in a much more general sense, as the Upanishads convey. In this wider sense, it could lead to something like the idea of cosmic memory in which all actions, whether of a plant or a rabbit, are continually present. In this sense karma is a principle of habit or memory.

**W.R.** It is really the underlying law of the operation of the cosmos and of the relation of man to that cosmos.

**R.S.** Not merely the relation of man to cosmos, but of cosmos to itself. One tiny aspect of that general memory or karma habit principle would be what happens in human beings. The larger parts of the vast universe, which don't have people in them, as far as we know would all be working according to this karmic memory system also. Human karma is what interests us most, but that is only one part of it. The way people usually talk about karma in later Hinduism associates it just with human reincarnation, as though they were not interested in the rest of the universe, and so we get a very narrow view of the whole thing.

**R.W.** Karma can be seen as universal causation, and universal causation encompasses all the world, with all its changes. What Will mentioned earlier reminds me of what David Bohm has also said, namely, that the Big Bang isn't such a big deal. Probably, in this ocean of energy, there was one ripple that spilled over and stood still, and that is what we call the Big Bang. Thus there were some such events before, and there will be some after. The Big Bang is the karma of the manifested world.

**R.S.** Raymond Pannikar writes interestingly on this subject. Most Hindus and most Theravada Buddhists do think of karma just in terms of human reincarnation. I talked to some very learned monks in the monastic university in Ceylon about this subject. They were primarily thinking in terms of human karma, although they said the same kind of thing might occur in the higher animals. When I asked about plants and crystals, they said those were just matter. They seemed to collapse into a kind of materialistic or mechanistic view of everything else.

**D.K.** Would you agree that Theravada Buddhism in particular has practically no cosmic world view?

**R.S.** Well, that is the impression I came to. But most Hindus don't think about these things in a broad way either. It is really Tibetan Buddhism and Mahayana in general that has gone furthest.

**R.W.** If the Hindus are true to their own tradition, they should have a larger view, because what is Pralaya and Manvantara but the evolution and the rest state of the whole universe, the Day and Night of Brahma.

**R.S.** The energetic aspect of this concept is intrinsic. Nataraja, which many people think of as *the* Hindu image of Shiva, is not in fact so commonly associated with Shiva to most Hindus as is the Lingam. Nataraja is found primarily in South India, and most especially in the Temple of Chitambaram, one of the five great Shiva temples in South India. There are Shiva temples for each of the Elements: Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Akasha. The temple of Shiva in its aspect of Akasha is at Chitambaram. So the dancing Shiva, the Nataraja, is in the temple of Akasha at Chitambaram. In most of North India Nataraja isn't at all a common image of Shiva. It has been highly popularized in the West, and therefore most people think that it is the standard image, but that is not so.

**R.W.** What implications do you draw from this?

**R.S.** It seems remarkable that this particular image of Shiva in the aspect of energy is associated with the temple of Akasha, which implies that the idea of the cosmic dance of energy is linked to the notion of Akasha. This would fit in with the concept of sunyata as an active void; that is, the fullness of potentiality out of which all things come, rather than a void in the sense of emptiness.

**R.W.** The Dalai Lama has brought out clearly that sunyata is simply the source of everything. It is Suchness, not emptiness in the Western sense of something that doesn't contain anything. It is potential.

Your theory Rupert has sometimes been criticized on the grounds that it implies that the M-field is caused by the forms. In other words, a thing has properties and characteristics which the field comes to learn and store, and then similar things will be fructified by that learning.

**R.S.** That is the whole question of where the first field comes from. I would simply reply with a question: Where did the first magnetic field come from? If you take for granted that magnetic fields occur because they can have magnets in them, there is an analogy. An M-field around a hen's egg is associated with that material structure, just as the magnetic field is associated with the magnet. If we ask; where is the origin of M-field of the hen? I think we can also ask what the origin is of the magnetic field. At the time of the Big Bang, at a temperature of some ten million degrees C, there was no matter. There weren't even any atoms. Basically, all there was was radiation. Therefore, there was a time in the history of the universe when the first magnet came into being.

**R.W.** I would put it differently. What you have said is true, but what it establishes is that the magnetic field is not eternal. But once it came into being, the entire field displayed the potential for magnetism. An object then tested that out. This resolves itself into the old question; is it the particular that has the characteristic, and then the universal; or is it the other way around? That is where we are stuck.

**W.R.** Do the hens come first or the eggs?

**R.S.** The two are associated, there is no doubt.

**Footnote:**

*Key Words of the Wisdom Tradition* by L. J. Bendit; p. 15.

Akasha (SK) – In modern terms it may be suggested that *Akasha* is a structureless homogenous substratum, or sub-substance of the universe. Possessing no features of any kind, it paradoxically has the possibility of having any number of features imposed upon or created within it – dimensions to any number, matter of any order (primarily by the action of Fohat, or basic energy, “digging holes in space, *Akasha*”) – and of conveying the whole possible gamut of energy-waves.

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