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Mauri Tangata: The Importance of Relationships for the Mauri of Tamariki

Introduction

Mauri tangata—the influence of energy exchanged through human relationships—acknowledges how the interactions between tamariki with those around them shapes their emotional, spiritual, and physical wellbeing.¹ Our tūpuna Māori understood that tamariki exist within complex layers of whakapapa relationships, connected to their ancestors, whānau, and the world around them. A central part of this connection is through mauri – the life force or energy that resides within all living things.² Tamariki are not isolated individuals; they are part of a broader network where the energy and actions of one person can affect the mauri of another.³

This article explores how mauri tangata strengthens these connections, influencing the balance of mauri within tamariki, and supporting them in their holistic growth.

Mauri ora, mauri tau and the power of mauri tangata

When mauri is in balance, we see this through tohu mauri—indicators of the state of life force within a tamaiti. Tohu mauri tau are signs of calm and grounded energy, where a tamaiti is settled and balanced.⁴ This might include remaining calm or returning to calm after challenges, focusing on tasks without agitation, or showing patience in new or stressful situations.

Tohu mauri ora reflect vitality, optimal health, and thriving wellbeing.⁵ Examples include actively engaging with others and the environment with enthusiasm, showing curiosity, or demonstrating energy and adaptability as new opportunities or challenges arise.⁶

Mauri tangata influences the balance of mauri tau and mauri ora. It acknowledges the significant impact of relationships on the state of mauri.⁷ Supportive, loving relationships help tamariki stabilise their mauri tau and energise their mauri ora, creating a healthy state of being.⁸ These relationships provide a foundation, helping tamariki return to equilibrium after emotional or behavioural shifts, while also fuelling the vitality that drives growth and learning.

Through these connections, tamariki develop important skills like problem-solving and adaptability. With the support of nurturing relationships, they become better equipped to manage challenges and make sense of the world around them. Rather than feeling

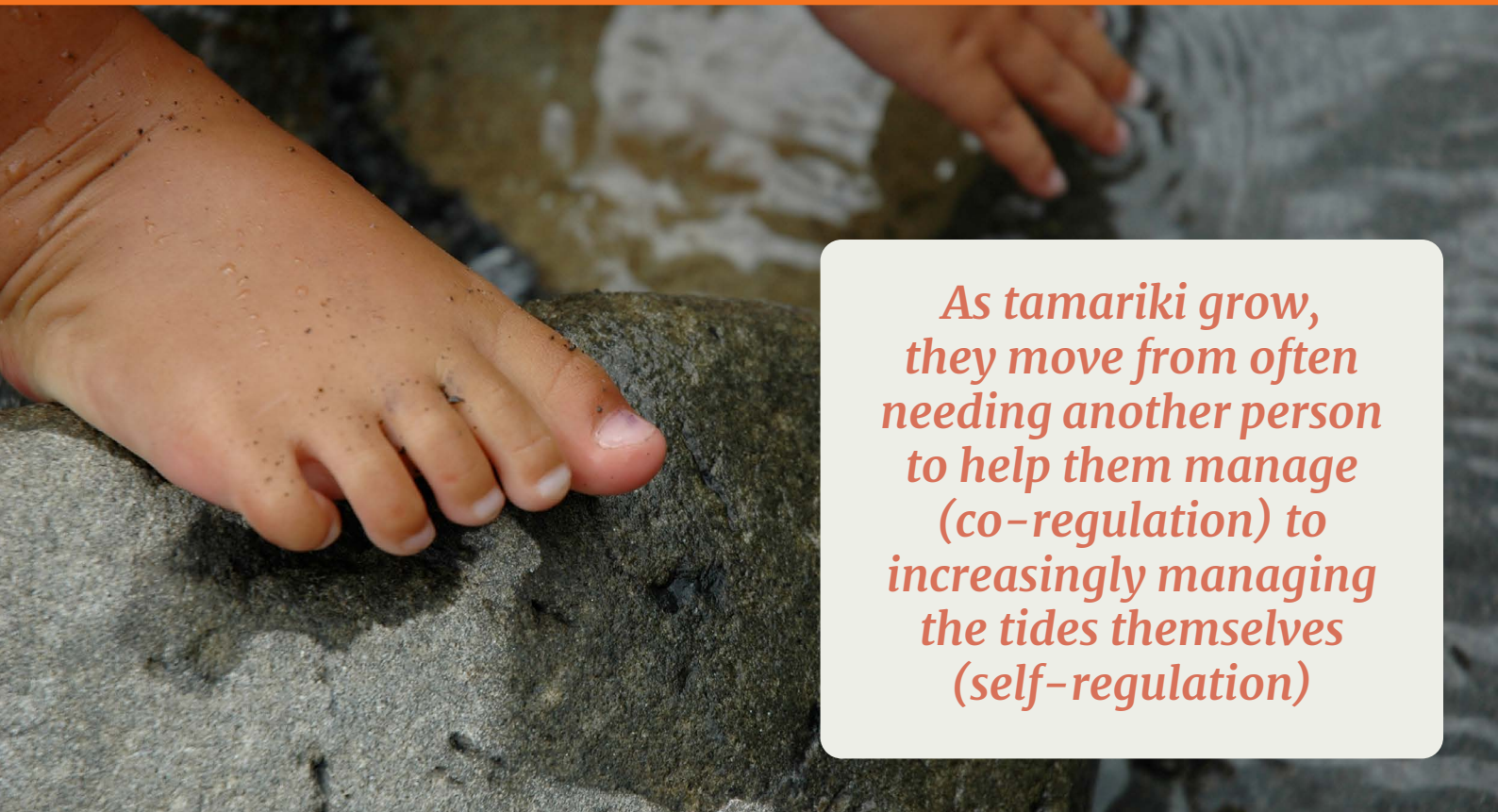
overwhelmed, tamariki can approach difficulties with more confidence, knowing they have strong, caring relationships to help them stay balanced and resilient. As mauri tau, mauri ora, and mauri tangata come into alignment, the ability to navigate life's experiences with balance, groundedness, and vitality is strengthened in tamariki.

Tohu mauri and wairua

Wairua and mauri are deeply intertwined forces that shape the wellbeing of tamariki. While mauri represents the life force that sustains vitality, wairua is the spiritual essence that gives this life force purpose and direction. In mauri tangata, wairua flows through relationships, guiding and nourishing mauri. When adults provide purposeful guidance, wairua helps

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tamariki manage their emotions and behaviours. This guidance is not just about immediate emotional management; it fosters holistic growth, balancing their spiritual and physical wellbeing. As tamariki develop the ability to interpret their own *tohu mauri*, supported through *mauri tangata*, tamariki develop a sense of direction, rooted in their *wairua*, helping them navigate life's challenges with confidence and connection.⁹

One example of the interplay of *wairua* and *mauri tangata* is a child learning to manage their physical energy, their emotions, and behaviours with support from an adult. This could be through positive touch, providing boundaries with empathy, or modelling problem solving and strategies of working through the big emotions and behaviours that can come through *ngā piki me ngā heke* – the ups and downs of life.¹⁰

When adults provide support and understanding of a child's needs, as well as model strategies of regulation themselves, they offer stability upon which tamariki can regulate their own *mauri*.¹¹

By helping tamariki observe the *tohu mauri* within them—the signs that reflect their emotional shifts, such as heightened energy or agitation, calm reflection, and moments of peacefulness—adults instil

in them not just the ability to manage their own big emotions, but a sense of purpose and direction grounded in *wairua*.¹²

As tamariki grow, they move from often needing another person to help them manage (co-regulation) to increasingly managing the tides themselves (self-regulation), increasingly learning to bring balance to their own *mauri* and *wairua* with greater independence.¹³

Fostering mana and tapu through mauri tangata

Mana and tapu are foundational concepts that uphold the spiritual and physical wellbeing of tamariki, intricately woven into *mauri tangata*.¹⁴

Mana represents the spiritual power and authority inherited from *atua* (deities) and *tūpuna* (ancestors). It is reflected in a child's uniqueness, abilities, and potential. Within *mauri tangata*, mana is affirmed and nurtured through positive, empowering interactions. For instance, encouraging a *tamaiti* to lead in small *whānau* activities or offering praise for their efforts helps to grow their *mana tangata* (personal authority).¹⁵ This nurturing of mana strengthens their *mauri*, helping them to flourish.¹⁶

Tapu signifies the spiritual protection and sacred status of tamariki, inherited from the atua and reflecting their divine connection. One way that tapu is upheld is through the respectful treatment of tamariki by those around them, protecting their safety and dignity. Examples include showing care in how adults speak to and handle tamariki, maintaining personal boundaries, and respecting their personal space.¹⁷ By protecting their tapu, adults contribute to a stable and balanced mauri, fostering emotional and spiritual safety within the child.¹⁸

In the synergy of mana, tapu, and mauri tangata, tamariki are supported to grow into their potential. Their mana is empowered through nurturing relationships, while their tapu is safeguarded by the respectful and loving actions of others. These relationships are vital to the balance of mauri, rooted in both wairua protection and personal empowerment.¹⁹

Ngā kare-ā-roto (feelings) and ngā matea iho (needs)

Giving time, space, and support for tamariki to find healthy ways to express and settle their kare-ā-roto (feelings) can help them to balance their mauri.²⁰ Guiding tamariki towards understanding their kare-ā-roto and being aware of their matea iho (core needs) can help them—over time—to recognise, process and regulate what is happening in their bodies and minds.²¹ When adults show ngākau aroha (empathy, understanding), tamariki are more likely to experience the positive effects of mauri tangata—loving and supportive relationships.²² This process of developing awareness and understanding of the feelings and needs within can help to reduce the extreme tides of mauri.²³

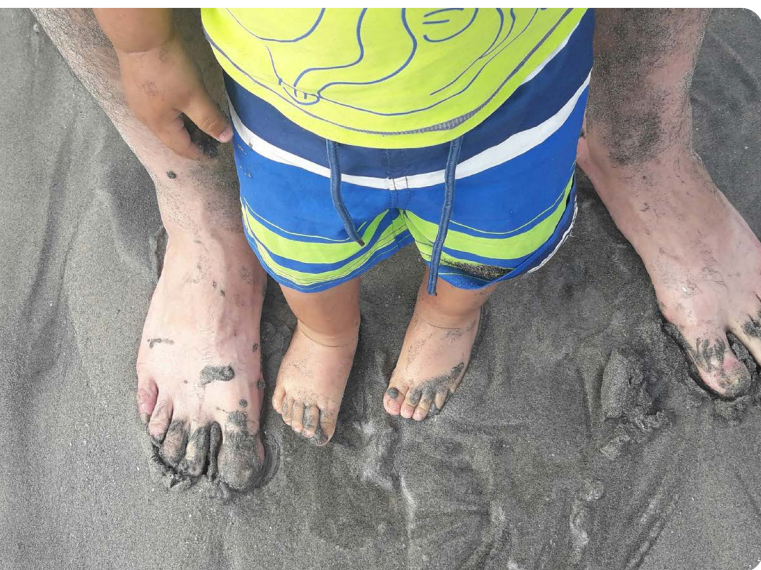


Whānau can support tamariki in a range of contexts, such as art, talking, writing, music, physical expressions, role play, and other forms of imaginative play. Providing healthy role models through these activities helps tamariki learn how to express emotions and respond to challenges.²⁴ Adults can model behaviours such as emotional regulation, patience, and empathy, offering tamariki examples of how to manage their own feelings and actions.²⁵

In addition to direct role modelling, shared activities such as pānui pukapuka (reading), discussing pūrākau (stories), and exploring tūpuna kōrero (ancestral wisdom) or mātauranga, offer opportunities to reflect on the behaviours and intentions of characters or tūpuna.²⁶ These stories provide indirect role models and help tamariki make sense of their own emotions and experiences.²⁷ By breaking down complex emotions and behaviours, these activities foster greater self-understanding and emotional resilience in tamariki.²⁸

Connecting with breath and grounding techniques

Kare-ā-roto are often experienced physically, so helping tamariki to recognise the connections between the tinana, wairua, hinengaro and whānau can provide ways of settling and balancing the mauri.²⁹ One example is connecting with the breath—hā ki roto (breathe in), hā ki waho (breathe out)—as a means of settling the tinana, whilst also acknowledging the wairua connections to the atua Tāwhirimātea.³⁰ Another example is grounding by standing barefoot on Papatūānuku (earth mother), feeling the energy and releasing any negative energy we might be



holding to Papatūānuku.³¹ These practices, when supported by others within mauri tangata, can help tamariki reconnect with themselves and the world around them, fostering balance and harmony in their mauri.³²

By providing everyday opportunities for healthy expressions of kare-a-roto, whilst remembering to acknowledge mauri noho pa—opportunities for quiet reflection and space—and tuning into matea iho (needs), adults can help tamariki (and themselves) maintain a balanced mauri.³³ By observing and asking, “What are these tohu trying to tell me about the mauri and wairua of the tamaiti?” we can be more empathetic to their needs, and more able to respond appropriately.³⁴ These tohu of their kare-a-roto, matea iho, and the state of their mauri are signposts we can follow to help settle them.³⁵ And as they learn to recognise the tohu within their own bodies, tamariki can uncover ways to settle their own mauri—with continued support as needed.³⁶

Building strength and confidence by fostering engagement, motivation and connection

Encouraging positive activities that stimulate interest and motivation can support a state of mauri ora and mauri tau. This may include activities such as hands-on learning, exploration, and creative projects—purposeful and meaningful activities that

challenge and inspire tamariki, contributing to their learning, growth and mauri ora.³⁷

Supporting tamariki to develop confidence and skills promotes mauri tū (alert awareness, resilience, courage). This may involve actions such as setting achievable goals, offering praise based on their effort, and providing opportunities to display leadership and mana motuhake (autonomy, independence). Traditional practices and cultural rituals (including modern interpretations) can reinforce a sense of connection and identity; a confidence in who they are within a whakapapa of interconnected relationships.³⁸ Encouraging tamariki to take on responsibilities and strive in their efforts (and reflect when things don't go to plan) further builds their skills and capabilities and helps them maintain a balanced mauri through ngā piki me ngā heke – the ups and downs of life.

Mauri tangata supports this process by creating an environment of connection, where tamariki are encouraged, challenged, and nurtured by those around them, allowing their mauri to be both stabilised and energised as they navigate responsibilities and leadership.³⁹

Support in challenging times

Supporting tamariki to feel safe is important in balancing their mauri.⁴⁰ Whānau can lay down a tūāpapa (foundation) for tamariki to grow to their

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healthy potential through care that is generally consistent, responsive and loving, in safe and calm environments.⁴¹ In challenging times, the presence of ongoing guidance and support from adults, can help buffer tamariki from harmful levels of stress⁴²; severe/ongoing stress can have a major impact on tamariki ōranga and tupuranga (growth).⁴³ Mauri tangata is essential here, as the energy exchanged in positive relationships provides tamariki with the strength and emotional security needed to manage stressful experiences and the impact of adversity.⁴⁴ Nurturing support can help to lessen the risk of tamariki experiencing severe mauri rere (heightened panic) and mauri moe (withdrawal/depression).⁴⁵

In cases where tamariki are facing significant challenges or trauma, additional professional support may be necessary. Specialists can provide targeted interventions to help tamariki process their emotions, including addressing prolonged states of mauri rere or mauri moe. Seeking professional help, alongside ongoing loving guidance, provides tamariki with support to work through their experiences, develop strategies to strengthen their ōranga, and restore balance to their mauri.⁴⁶

Supporting mauri tangata through tūpuna practices

Our tūpuna used various practices rooted in the understanding of mauri and its significance, to nurture the mauri of tamariki. Here are some examples:

Kawa and Tikanga: During customary rites & practices, kawa are the formal protocols and tikanga are the practices that ensure that values are maintained

in ways that are tika (correct). Kawa and tikanga guide the processes to uphold respect and integrity. Many examples of kawa and tikanga can be found in practices relating to childbirth and newborn pēpi—whakawhānau pēpi. Some examples include:

Karakia (spiritual incantations): Karakia serve as a bridge connecting pēpi, their whānau, and tūpuna atua, nurturing the spiritual bonds that strengthen both individual and collective mauri.⁴⁷ Prior to conception, in-utero, during pregnancy and from the very first moments after birth, karakia were used in order to embrace pēpi—present and future—in the depth of their connection to wairua and whakapapa.⁴⁸ This connection is not just about the recitation of words, but about the deeper spiritual force that karakia carries.⁴⁹

As Tohunga Hōhepa Kereopa explains, “The mauri gives karakia its impact... It’s not about knowing karakia, it’s knowing about the force, the life force of karakia that makes it happen”.⁵⁰ His words highlight that the power of karakia lies not in the words alone, but in the life force that flows through them, intertwining mauri tangata and wairua to nurture and protect pēpi from birth.⁵¹

Tohi (dedication ceremonies): The tohi ceremony is a sacred and traditional dedication ritual performed to connect the tamaiti to specific atua (deities) and bestow spiritual protection and guidance. Water, symbolising the cleansing and blessing properties associated with tapu (sacredness), is often used in this ritual. One aim of the ceremony is to strengthen the mauri of the tamaiti by fostering connections to both the spiritual realm and their whakapapa.

The tohi is typically performed after the pito (umbilical cord) has fallen off, symbolising the readiness of pēpi to be dedicated. Tikao (2020) describes how the tohi process bestows mana on pēpi, strengthening their spiritual connections and supporting their growth.⁵² The tohi ceremony strengthens whakapapa connections, preparing pēpi for life by integrating spiritual guardianship with practical preparation for future challenges.⁵³

Whenua ki te Whenua (burying the placenta): Literally translated as the ‘placenta (whenua) to the land (also whenua),’ this ritual symbolises the profound connection between a newborn pēpi, their ancestors, and Papatūānuku (the earth mother). Traditionally, the whenua (placenta) is often buried in the whenua (land) to preserve the mana, mauri, and connection of pēpi to their whakapapa. However, as Tikao (2013) highlights, the placenta may be placed in other significant locations, such as rock clefts or

trees, depending on hapū customs.⁵⁴ This connection reinforces the identity of pēpi and their bond to the land, nurturing their spiritual and physical wellbeing from birth. The act ties pēpi to their whakapapa, anchoring them in their tūrangawaewae (place of belonging), thus sustaining their mauri and tapu (spiritual protection). Through this process, whānau acknowledge the holistic, interconnected nature of mauri, wairua, and whakapapa.⁵⁵

Manaakitanga (care and support): Ensuring that māmā and pēpi are well cared for and supported by the whānau during and after the birth reinforces the collective responsibility and interconnectedness within the whānau.⁵⁶ This care—mauri tangata in action—helps to uphold the mana and tapu of both māmā and pēpi,⁵⁷ and nurtures their mauri, fostering a balanced and healthy life force for both mother and pēpi. In mauri tangata, manaakitanga forms the



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relational framework that supports pēpi through the loving actions of others, sustaining their wellbeing.⁵⁸

Ngā kete wānanga: Māori Marsden likened child-birth to the arrival of ngā kete wānanga—the three baskets of knowledge that contain sacred, ancestral, and worldly knowledge.⁵⁹ Pēpi enter the world with the capacity for learning and development, which unfolds through the nurturing relationships and experiences they have with loving adults.⁶⁰ The rituals surrounding whakawhānau pēpi, such as karakia and tohi nurture the physical wellbeing of pēpi, safeguarding and strengthening their mauri, laying the foundation for their ongoing learning and holistic growth.⁶¹ Through the care and attention given to their mauri, pēpi are supported to access and develop the knowledge held within ngā kete wānanga, enabling them to thrive and grow in all aspects of life.

Following in the footsteps of our tūpuna, integrating kawa and tikanga that recognise the impact of mauri tangata on tamariki wellbeing can help them grow towards their potential. In this way, mauri tangata not only supports the balancing of mauri tau but also nourishes the spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing and vitality of tamariki – mauri ora!⁶²

Conclusion

Understanding and maintaining the balance of mauri is essential for the wellbeing of tamariki and whānau. Our tūpuna, through practices like kawa, tikanga, karakia, and manaakitanga, understood the power of mauri tangata—the energy exchanged in relationships—as a key influence shaping tamariki wellbeing. By integrating these practices, we provide an environment that nurtures the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of tamariki.

Mana and tapu, when upheld within mauri tangata, protect and empower tamariki, ensuring they are treated with respect, dignity, and love. This safeguarding of mana and tapu is crucial for their growth, fostering both confidence and security. When adults provide guidance through loving relationships, tamariki are supported in developing the ability to manage their emotions, find balance in their mauri, and grow in connection with the world around them.

Tohu mauri—signs of life force—are present in the everyday behaviours and emotions of tamariki, and by noticing and responding to these signs, whānau and kaimahi can support tamariki in maintaining a healthy mauri. As tamariki grow, the presence of mauri tangata helps them develop resilience, problem-solving skills, and adaptability, supporting them to face life's challenges with increased confidence.

By fostering an environment where the principles of mana, tapu, and mauri tangata are upheld, we not only nurture individual wellbeing but also strengthen the collective mauri of whānau, hapū, iwi, and community. Through the ever-flowing currents of life, the guidance of our tūpuna practices and mātauranga Māori helps tamariki to be connected, balanced, and ready to thrive within their cultural and relational foundations.⁶³

Endnotes

1. Pere, 1994; Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
2. Durie, 2001; Mead, 2016; McLachlan & Waitoki, 2022
3. Durie, 2001; Mead, 2016; Durie, 2020; McLachlan et al., 2021
4. Smith, 2019; McLachlan & Ngāpō, 2024; Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
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6. Durie, 2015; McLachlan & Waitoki, 2022
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9. Pohatu & Pohatu, 2011; Mead, 2016; McLachlan et al., 2024; Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
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11. Durie, 2015; Mead, 2016; Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
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29. Durie, 1998; Smith, 2019; McLachlan, Waitoki, & Cherrington, 2021
30. McLachlan, Waitoki, & Cherrington, 2021
31. Barlow, 1991; Henare, 1988; McLachlan et al., 2021
32. Barlow, 1991; Pere, 1994; Durie, 1998; Smith, 2019; McLachlan, & Waitoki, 2022
33. Henare, 1988; Durie, 1998; McLachlan & Waitoki, 2022; Ngāpō & Kingi, 2024
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36. Pere, 1994; Smith, 2019; McLachlan, Waitoki, & Cherrington, 2021; McLachlan et al., 2024
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39. Barlow, 1991; Pere, 1994; Durie, 1998; Te Mauri Tau, 2021
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49. Henare, 1988; Marsden, 2003
50. Moon, 2003, p. 39
51. Pere, 1994; Marsden, 2003
52. Tikao, 2020, pp. 244-245
53. Jenkins & Harte, 2014, p. 36
54. Tikao, 2013
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60. Pere, 1994; Marsden, 2003
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Glossary of Māori words:

atua – Ancestor of continuing influence; deities or spiritual beings that have control over particular domains of the world.

hinengaro – Mind; mental and emotional aspects of a person.

kawa – Formal protocols that guide practices in a correct and respectful manner.

karakia – Spiritual incantations or prayers connecting people to the spiritual world.

kare-ā-roto – Emotions; inner feelings and emotional states.

mana – Spiritual power, influence, prestige, status

mana motuhake – Autonomy, independence, personal authority.

mana tangata – Personal authority and leadership, often nurtured through positive relationships.

manaakitanga – Kindness, generosity, and support; the act of caring for others.

matea iho – Core needs.

mauri – Life force or vital essence that animates and sustains all living things.

mauri moe – State of rest or stagnation, often reflecting a troubled or disconnected state.

mauri noho – Ranging from a state of settled or resting life force to a stagnant and withdrawn state.

mauri ora – State of optimal health and vitality, with balanced and flourishing mauri.

mauri rere – A state of panic and distress.

mauri tangata – The impact and influence of relationships on an individual's mauri.

mauri tau – Balanced and settled life force; a state of harmony and peace.

ngā-kare-a-roto – Emotions; inner feelings and emotional states.

ngā kete wānanga – The three baskets of knowledge that contain sacred, ancestral, and worldly knowledge. These are:

Kete Tuauri, the basket of sacred knowledge containing spiritual teachings and rituals related to the unseen world;

Kete Tuatea, the basket of ancestral knowledge containing practices that relate to everyday life and human experience;

Kete Aronui, the basket of natural knowledge containing knowledge of the natural world, including arts, sciences, and crafts that foster harmony with the environment.

ngā piki me ngā heke – The ups and downs of life; fluctuations and changes experienced.

ngākau aroha – Empathy, compassion, kindness, and love; a deep and genuine care for others.

ōranga – Wellbeing; overall health and life balance.

Papatūānuku – Earth, Earth mother.

pānui pukapuka – Reading books.

pito – Umbilical cord.

pūrākau – Stories, often used to convey traditional knowledge or lessons.

tapū – Sacredness and spiritual restriction; something set apart due to its sacred nature.

taiao – Environment, nature, Earth, natural world.

tikanga – Correct procedure, custom, rule, code, practice, convention, protocol - the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context.

tohi – Sacred ceremonies, often performed to dedicate and bless a child.

tohu – Signs, symbols, or indicators that provide insight into a person's state or the environment, particularly relating to mauri, wairua and wellbeing.

tohu mauri – Indicators of the state of mauri, observable through behaviours, emotions, and physical health.

tohu mauri rere – Signs of heightened panic, anxiety or imbalance in mauri, reflecting stress or distress.

tohu mauri moe – Signs of withdrawal, stagnation, depression or a troubled state of mauri.

tūāpapa – Foundation or base, often used to refer to a solid grounding for growth.

tūpuna – Ancestors.

tupuranga – Growth or development, often referring to physical, emotional, and spiritual maturation.

ūkaipō – The nurturing place/ origin or true home that connects a child to their mother and land, ie their sources of sustenance.

whakapapa – Genealogy; the layers of ancestral lineage connecting people to their ancestral heritage, including connections beyond people to the natural world and atua.

whenua ki te whenua – The practice of burying the placenta in te taiao—often the land—symbolising the connection between the child and Papatūānuku, the earth mother.

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