



TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

# Body in Practice

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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1

WHAT BODY?

Seventh-century Buddhist sage Shantideva on the body as illusion.

SHANTIDEVA

What we call the body is not feet or shins,  
The body, likewise, is not thighs or loins.  
It's not the belly nor indeed the back,  
And from the chest and arms the body is not formed.

The body is not ribs or hands,  
Armpits, shoulders, bowels, or entrails;  
It is not the head or throat:  
From none of these is "body" constituted.

If "body," step by step,  
Pervades and spreads itself throughout its members,  
Its parts indeed are present in the parts,  
But where does the "body," in itself, abide!

If "body," single and entire,  
Is present in the hand and other members,  
However many parts there are, the hand and all the rest,  
You'll find an equal quantity of "bodies."

If “body” is not outside or within its parts,  
How is it, then, residing in its members?  
And since it has no basis other than its parts,  
How can it be said to be at all?

Thus there is no “body” in the limbs,  
But from illusion does the idea spring,  
To be affixed to a specific shape—  
Just as when a scarecrow is mistaken for a man.

As long as the conditions are assembled,  
A body will appear and seem to be a man.  
As long as all the parts are likewise present,  
It’s there that we will see a body.

Likewise, since it is a group of fingers,  
The hand itself is not a single entity.  
And so it is with fingers, made of joints—  
And joints themselves consist of many parts.

These parts themselves will break down into atoms,  
And atoms will divide according to direction.  
These fragments, too, will also fall to nothing.  
Thus atoms are like empty space—  
they have no real existence.

All form, therefore, is like a dream,  
And who will be attached to it, who thus investigates!  
The body, in this way, has no existence;  
What is male, therefore, and what is female!

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2

FINDING SENSE  
IN SENSATION

The crucial role of the body in Vipassana practice

S. N. GOENKA

The Buddha was the foremost scientist of mind and matter (*nama* and *rupa*). What makes him a peerless scientist is his discovery that *tanha*, or craving, and by extension, aversion—arises from *vedana*, or sensation on the body.

Before the time of the Buddha, little if any importance was given to bodily sensation. In fact, it was the centrality of bodily sensation that was the Buddha's great discovery in his quest to determine the root cause of suffering and the means to its cessation. Before the Buddha, India's spiritual masters emphasized teachings that encouraged people to turn away from sensory objects and ignore the sensations that contact with them engenders.

But the Buddha, a real scientist, examined sensation more closely. He discovered that when we come into contact with a sense-object through one of the six sense doors (ears, eyes, nose, tongue, body, mind), we cling to the sensation it creates, giving rise to *tanha* (wanting it to stay and to increase) and aversion (wanting it to cease). The mind then reacts

with thoughts of either “I want” or “I do not want.” Buddha discovered that everything that arises in the mind arises with the sensations on the body and that these sensations are the material we have to work with.

The first step, then, is to train the mind to become so sharp and sensitive that it will learn to detect even the subtlest sensations. That job is done by *anapana*—the practice of awareness of the breath—on the small area under the nostrils, above the upper lip. If we concentrate on this area, the mind becomes sharper and sharper, subtler and subtler. This is the way we begin to become aware of every sort of sensation on the body.

Next, we feel the sensations but don’t react to them. We can learn to maintain this equanimity towards sensations by understanding their transitory nature.

Whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, gross or subtle, every sensation shares the same characteristic: it arises and passes away, arises and passes away. It is this arising and passing that we have to experience through practice, not just accept as truth because Buddha said so, not just accept because intellectually it seems logical enough to us. We must experience sensation’s nature, understand its flux, and learn not to react to it.

As we reach deeper states of awareness, we will be able to detect subtler and subtler sensations, or vibrations of greater rapidity, arising and passing with greater speed. In these deep states, our mind will become so calm, so tranquil, so pure, that we will immediately recognize any impurity accompanying the agitated state and make the choice to refrain from reacting adversely. It becomes clear to us that we can’t harm anybody without first defiling ourselves with emotions like hate or anger or lust. If we do this, we will come to an experiential understanding of the deep truth of *anicca*, or impermanence. As we observe sensations without reacting to them, the impurities in our minds lose their strength

and cannot overpower us.

The Buddha was not merely giving sermons; he was offering a technique to help people reach a state in which they could feel the harm they do to themselves. Once we see this, *sila*, or ethics, follows naturally. Just as we pull our hand from a flame, we step back from harming ourselves and others.

It is a wonderful discovery that by observing physical sensations on the body, we can eradicate the roots of the defilements of mind. As we practice more, negative emotions will become far more conspicuous to us much earlier; as soon as they arise, we will become aware of sensations and have the opportunity to make ethical choices. But first we need to begin with what is present to us deeply in our minds at the level of sensation. Otherwise, we will keep ourselves and others miserable for a very long time.

**S. N. Goenka** first began teaching ten-day vipassana meditation courses in India in 1969. His courses in vipassana instruction are now being given to prison inmates, government officials, corporations, schoolchildren, and the homeless.

3

REMEMBERING  
HOW TO WALK

A writer finds his feet in walking meditation.

JOHN HOUSE

*In my room, the world is beyond my understanding; But when  
I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud.*

—Wallace Stevens, “Of the Surface of Things”

Somewhere in my late twenties, I forgot how to walk. It may have happened earlier, though I wouldn’t have noticed, as I was still going through the motions.

I had walked a lot as a kid, rambling mostly through the suburban woods that surrounded our suburban home. My route invariably took me across backyard borderlands where the neighbors’ lawns were left untended, and fences went unrepaired. There were trails of flattened grass that led the way, and rank smells where the dribbling creeks broadened out into swamps, and clouds of gnats that swarmed in front of me like buzzing atoms. Two deepwater ponds lay within easy reach, providing undersized pickerel and perch in the summer and risky skating in winter. I also knew how to find the mires and eddying pools where frogs and newts and water striders lived, and the ramshackle log fort where



my classmates stashed their dirty magazines and pilfered cigarettes.

For the most part, however, I wasn't really looking for any of that. In fact, I wasn't really looking for anything at all. I was more often happy enough just to be off on my own, away from the stony lot where my friends were playing tag or roughhouse football, or from the over heated living rooms where they lay on their stomachs, watching TV. Moving cautiously and quietly, I haunted the woods like a ghost, dressed in jeans, an old pair of work boots, and a dark plaid Pendleton shirt I had lifted from my father's bottom dresser drawer. I imagine that in this dreamy wandering, I was acting out a kind of introspection, the way my father was apt to take to his car on weekends, enlisting my siblings and me for some seemingly errandless excursion. My walks were aimless and unanticipated, and they made the purposeful times more bearable. That, I suppose, is the first thing about walking I forgot.

The older I grew, the less time I spent in the woods. Real estate developers had found their own use for them, and like some newly discovered tribesman, I was caught between the push of a shrinking habitat and the pull of a larger social life. I got a job and, eventually, a car of my own. By the end of high school, walking had become a largely practical matter: the solution to a dead battery or a missed ride; the quickest route to my best friend's house; a sedative exercise after some heated argument with my parents; or, when my courage allowed, a sly means of seduction in the midst of a Saturday dance at the YMCA.

When I moved to New York after college, I fell naturally into the habit of subways and buses and cabs. If I traveled around at all on two legs, I did so at a culturally correct near-jog, busily going to or coming from, and outpacing nearly everyone else on the sidewalk. There were a few years when, working in midtown, I took to strolling home on mild nights. But there was usually some shopping to be done along the way, or

some other secondary purpose, and because my destination was set, the trip was never more than a reacquaintance with the familiar, a retracing of steps I'd taken a few days before. In any event, I soon took a job farther downtown, beyond the limits of my stamina and patience. And so gradually I lost sight of what it felt like to move about in the world under my own power. This was the second thing I forgot.

Strange to say, it was only recently that I recognized the extent of what I'd lost. I was in central Massachusetts, at the end of an unthinkable warm February day, pacing deliberately back and forth in the basement of the Insight Meditation Society. I could hear the muffled chitter of birds on the feeder outside, the creak of the wooden flooring upstairs, and the faint breathing of the other retreatants pacing alongside me. I could see through the windows that the sun was burying itself in a bank of yellow clouds, and I could smell the kitchen getting ready for evening tea. But more vivid than any of that was the simple sensation of walking: the gentle lift of my hamstrings, the delicate wobble of each foot as I pressed it down into the textured carpet, the roller-coaster rise and fall of my center of balance as I moved forward.

I had done walking meditation before, as *kinhin* on several Zen retreats, and had thought it nothing more than a few minutes of meager relief for my *zafu*-crippled knees. This was something different, though. Free to follow my own direction and take my own time, I felt as if I had slowly returned to my senses. It was, in some small way, a revelation.

Shortly after I returned from Massachusetts, still softened up from all the sitting and still enthralled by the reclaimed wonder of my own two feet, I stumbled upon an essay by Thoreau that my English Lit. professors had somehow overlooked. It clarified for me what had happened on retreat. One of the last pieces he committed to writing, it has the valedictory air of someone looking toward a place of final rewards, and

the urgency of someone wanting to explicate a few important matters for those left behind. The essay is, Thoreau warns, “an extreme statement” and “an emphatic one.” Oddly enough, his subject is walking.

“I have met,” he tells us, “with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived ‘from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going à la sainte terre’—to the holy land.”

Thoreau’s own writerly progress through his argument is, indeed, extreme at times: “We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return .... If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk.”

But this extremity hints at the deeper point he’s making—a point as radical, perhaps, as the Buddha’s—and in preaching his “gospel according to this moment,” Thoreau is not very far from preaching the dharma: “So we saunter toward the Holy Land; till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, so warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn.”

It’s a compelling reminder of not only how to walk but also why.

**John House** is a contributing editor to Tricycle.

4

EVOLUTION'S BODY

WES NISKER

In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha says, “This body is not mine or anyone else’s. It has arisen due to past causes and conditions.” The Buddha intuited some type of evolutionary process that creates our bodies, and his essential point is that they are neither formed nor owned by us. We now have evidence that our bodies arise from the forces and elements that make up the entire universe, through a complex chain of interdependent events. Internalizing this understanding can help liberate us from the powerful sense of ownership and attachment we have to the body, which is a cause of tremendous suffering, especially as the body grows old and we must face its inevitable destiny.

The following guided reflections from the Buddha are adapted from the classic exercises on mindfulness of body found in the *Mahasatipatthana Sutra*. Here we combine the experiential aspect of bringing mindfulness to various parts of the body, with some simple reflection on the evolutionary origin of those body parts. These exercises can help to reveal that this body is not ours; it is evolution’s body. The body we live in is a loaner. The exercises are best done in a seated position (sitting in a chair is fine), keeping the spine as straight as possible. It is useful to read through the entire series of exercises, and then return to the beginning and focus on a single reflection at a time. After reading a reflection on

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one particular body part or function, close your eyes and bring your attention to that area of the body and begin the exercise. These reflections can be done in any order, or separately, and you may take as long as you wish for any of them.

### THE BODY AND THE ELEMENTS

Begin by bringing attention to your entire body, and for a few moments just feel the body's warmth and strength, its ability to hold itself upright. The vitality and aliveness that you experience in your body require various chemical and mineral substances, a continuous supply of oxygen, the energy of the sun, and the cohesion and conductivity of water. The Buddha instructs us to reflect on the body as composed of the elements of earth, air, fire, and water, so that we will see how this life is interwoven with universal processes.

Resting attention on your breath for a few moments, sense the fact that you are located in an atmosphere—the medium through which you move, and by which your body lives. Can you feel the air all around you as a substance? Move your arm and feel it parting the air, almost as if you were swimming through this medium.

Now bring attention to your breathing, and simultaneously look at a plant in your house or the plants growing outside, and realize that with each breath you are feeding the plants and being fed by them. Doing this simple reflection just a few times can begin to alter your feelings about the plant kingdom.

As you sense yourself exchanging nutrients with the plants, you will be able to recognize that you are not only located in an atmosphere, but are an integral part of it. With every breath you are participating in the

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great cycles of water and gases, the hydrosphere and atmosphere. With each breath you are joining in the single great breath of all earth life.

### THE SKELETAL FRAME

Focus attention on the great bone of your skull. Let awareness roam over the entire area of your head, feeling this massive bone that houses the delicate brain. Notice the holes conveniently placed for the sense organs of hearing, smelling, tasting, and seeing, and the great opening at the bottom of the skull for the spine to enter. It has taken 500 million years of vertebrate evolution to get your skull into this shape, with its narrow, brooding forehead.

To get a better sense of the skull bone, gently clench your jaw and grind your teeth together a little. As you feel the power of your jaw, you might reflect on the fact that the jaw began developing in an early, wormlike marine creature, which gained great survival advantage with the newfound ability to eat things that were bigger than itself. The vast number of chewers now alive in the world testifies to the usefulness of this powerful hinge.

Next, move awareness down from the skull into your spine and ribs. See if you can sense the entire skeleton of bones extending outward from that central ridgeline of spine. If you move your limbs or head around a little, you might get a kinesthetic sense of the skeletal structure. You could also visualize the skeletons you have seen, from Halloween, anatomy books, or Grateful Dead posters. As you visualize and feel the bone structure, be aware that there are over six hundred separate bones in your body.

While you are feeling the entire skeleton, you might also reflect for

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a moment on the fact that our bones are composed of calcium phosphate. They are, quite literally, the clay of earth, molded into our human shape. Our bodies are not only on the earth, they are of the earth. When seated or walking, you can feel your body as a kind of earth sprout that gained mobility.

While on the subject of bones, we can draw a good lesson in dharma practice from the early microbes, which apparently were irritated by calcium phosphate and other sea salts and would flush them from their bodies. Then some enterprising microbes, perhaps after “sitting through” the irritation (so to speak), discovered that the mineral substances could help protect their bodies. Thus the bones of the first skeleton began to take shape. It is interesting to note that in mineral content and porosity, human bones are nearly identical to certain species of South Pacific coral, and plastic surgeons have begun to use this coral to fix and replace human bone.

## THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

Next, move your mindful awareness to your stomach area. Although you may not feel many distinct sensations, let your awareness linger there as you reflect on some of the activity taking place in this region of your body. For instance, at this moment, along with digestion taking place —nutrients being extracted from food substances and waste being processed for disposal—there are thousands of cells being born and dying. Your stomach contains hundreds of thousands of digestive glands, and the stomach must produce a new lining every three days to protect itself from its own digestive juices. For this task, your stomach is producing up to five hundred thousand new cells every minute.

Along with all of this activity, you might consider that at this very

moment there are more living beings inside your stomach than all the humans who have ever lived on earth. Considering the billions of bacteria and microbes that live inside each of us, microbiologist Lynn Margulis writes, “Our concept of the individual is totally warped. All of us are walking communities.” We are not separate selves. Each of us is an ecosystem.

## THE HANDS

Bring attention to your hands. Spread your fingers out, wiggle them, press them against your palm and thumb. The five-digit design of your hands goes back 370 million years to the first land vertebrates, called tetrapods. Maybe five digits were the minimum number needed to hold on to the land and not slip back into the sea. As you feel your hands, consider that just two million years ago, a blink in biological time, our ancestors could barely manipulate rocks and sticks, and now some of our hands can play the piano, type over a hundred words a minute, and build rockets and computers. You can experience the great dexterity of your hands right now, by simply unbuttoning a button. You don’t even consciously have to direct those movements! Our hands (and brains) definitely deserve a round of applause.

As you clap, you might also notice the flexibility of your wrists. Most people can move their wrists around in an arc of almost 360 degrees, and our shoulders are almost as flexible. According to the evolutionary biologists, this range of movement in our wrists and shoulders came about because for millions of years our ancestors got around by swinging through the trees. How many of our physical characteristics are inherited from the life that came before?

Recent research indicates that the dexterity of our hands was also



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very important in the growth of our brains. As our hands began to manipulate tools, a bigger brain was required to direct the movements and store the enormous new amounts of information being learned. The interaction and mutual stimulation of hand and brain created an evolutionary feedback loop in which both developed to an unprecedented degree. As you move your fingers around - buttoning, typing, playing an instrument - you might reflect on the complex activity going on simultaneously in your brain to direct those movements.

As we feel our arms and hands, we can also reflect that these appendages were once fins, and not just in our distant ancestors. Each of us, in the womb, develops both fin and gill-like structures as we cycle through the genetic instructions of the many life forms that preceded us. Our body and brain are built out of the triumphs and defeats of all earth life, an amazingly complex stream of causes and conditions.

## THE WHOLE BODY

Finally, bring awareness to your entire body, sensing the complete organism. Feel the energies within the body, the streams of sensation, the points of twitching or tension, the great pulses of breath and heartbeat.

Realize how much activity is taking place at this moment within you - and without you. Right now there are literally millions of brain cells firing signals to one another, a veritable storm of electrical activity taking place inside your head. Your brain stem is busy monitoring your body temperature and rate of heartbeat, while your limbic system remains on alert for possible survival threats and opportunities.

Meanwhile, oxygen is being inhaled and transported throughout your body and burned as fuel in the process of transforming the stored

energy of the sun into your own living energy. In every second, millions of cells are dying and millions more are being created. Chemicals that do the work of the brain, stomach, liver, and kidneys are being manufactured and secreted. As we contemplate our body, we begin to realize that we don't direct most of these processes. We don't live, so much as life lives through us.

These are just a few reflections on the evolutionary sources of the body and behaviors: They are practices of both deep ecology and self-liberation. Using scientific information as a skillful means, we can experience what has been called our "ecological self," or "species self." Through such exercises we can begin to realize that our individual human life is first and foremost life: second, it is human; and only third is it individual. Getting to know ourselves as biological beings, interwoven with all of earth's elements and other forms of life, can be a good source of both our liberation and compassion.

**Wes Nisker** is the author of *Buddha's Nature*, recently issued in paperback by Bantam. His book *Crazy Wisdom* was reissued by Ten Speed Press last year. Founder and co-editor of the Buddhist journal *Inquiring Mind*, Nisker is a meditation teacher affiliated with Spirit Rock Center in California.

5

BODY AS BODY

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN

This Vipassana practice is based on the *Mahsatipatthana Sutta*, the scripture that deals with the four foundations of mindfulness. We started with the first domain of mindfulness: paying attention to body sensations. As a way of beginning, we have people bring their attention to the breath and to walking. But really, if you think about it, is there such a thing as “the breath?” There are vibrations and pulsings and pullings; there are all kinds of sensations that make up this thing called “the breath,” but there isn’t any one thing that makes up “the breath.” Neither is there any such thing in walking as “lifting” or “moving” or “placing” our feet. Those are names that we give to a very complex variety of body sensations.

And even when we begin to practice for the very first time, when we close our eyes for the first five minutes, there is such a lot of dharma to learn. One sits down, closes one’s eyes, and sees that there is a lot going on! Isn’t it true that there are twitchings and pulsings that you weren’t aware of? If you pay attention for just five minutes, you know some very fundamental dharma: things change, nothing stays comfortable, sensations come and go quite impersonally, according to conditions, but not because of anything that you do or think you do. Changes come and go quite by themselves. In the first five minutes of paying attention, you learn that pleasant sensations lead to the desire that these sensations will stay and that unpleasant sensations lead to the hope that they will go

away. And both the attraction and the aversion amount to tension in the mind. Both are uncomfortable. So in the first five minutes, you get a big lesson about suffering: wanting things to be other than what they are. Such a tremendous amount of truth to be learned from just closing your eyes and paying attention to bodily sensations.

So then why, if all the myriad body sensations are so important, why on earth spend so much time bringing the attention back to the breath? Especially when people come to me and say, “I have a lot of trouble staying with the breath.” If I now say that the breath is merely one of many different bodily sensations, why does our instruction concentrate so much attention on the breath? We’re not doing this to become good breathers or good walkers, or even good meditators. We’re doing this to become clear about what is true. So why talk about the breath so much? Breath is a really good point of focus to begin with, even to end with, but certainly to begin with. It’s always there. We are all always breathing. If you haven’t got any problems with your breathing apparatus, it’s a relatively neutral activity to pay attention to. It’s uncomplicated, rather plain. For that reason, as we begin to focus on it and pay attention to it, it allows the mind to become somewhat concentrated and calm as well. It’s changing all the time, but it’s rather steady in its changing. So it’s a good tool for focusing and also for calming the attention. It is the same with walking. You don’t have problems with walking. It’s not a conflictual activity. It’s repetitive, uncomplicated, fairly neutral. So it has the possibility of calming; and both walking and breathing have the possibility not only of calming and focusing the mind but also of allowing insight to arise. Some people practice throughout their entire lives just by paying attention to breathing. Everything that is true about anything is true about breath: it’s impermanent; it arises and it passes away. Yet if you didn’t breathe, you would become uncomfortable; so then you would

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take in a big inhalation and feel comfortable again. But if you hold onto the breath, it's no longer comfortable, so you have to breathe out again. All the time shifting, shifting. Uncomfortableness is continually arising. We see that everything keeps changing. Sometimes people worry a lot. I notice that in interviews, people come to me and feel that they are not in touch with their breath, or cannot find their breath, or work with it. Breath takes care of itself. Arising and passing away quite impersonally, with no one breathing. The same is true of walking. This understanding comes through our attention.

**Sylvia Boorstein** is a psychotherapist and one of the founding teachers of Spirit Rock Center in Woodacre, California, a retreat center in the Theravada tradition that emphasizes vipassana meditation practice. "Body as Body" is excerpted from a talk given to students at the end of a meditation retreat.

6

FULL BODY, EMPTY MIND

When we turn our awareness to the full range of physical sensations,  
the body becomes a doorway to awakening.

WILL JOHNSON

In many Buddhist groups, the body is addressed only in basic instructions on posture for meditation, sometimes lasting no more than a few minutes. Many practitioners are drawn to body-based practices such as yoga, martial arts, or the Alexander technique to complement or even enable their sitting practice, but they are often on their own when it comes to integrating these traditions with their larger spiritual path. What is being lost in this gap? One of the most convincing voices for the importance of the body in meditation belongs to Will Johnson, author of several books on the topic, including *The Posture of Meditation; Aligned, Relaxed, and Resilient*; and *Yoga of the Mahamudra*.

Johnson, the director of the Institute for Embodiment Training in British Columbia, Canada, began his Buddhist practice in 1972 and was certified in the deep bodywork system of Rolfing in 1976. Drawing on his experience in these traditions, Sufism, and others, he now teaches embodiment training, what he calls “a path of awakening that views the body as the doorway, not the obstacle, to personal growth and spiritual transformation.” I exchanged emails with Johnson to discuss how meditators can explore the body and what they might gain from the practice.

—Andrew Merz

**You've said that in order to experience emptiness of mind, one must first experience fullness of body. While this intuitively resonates with many meditators, clear explanations of why that is true and how it can be integrated into a Buddhist meditation practice are hard to find. How do we start to understand this view in a Buddhist context, and how do we address it without feeling as though we are detracting from our usual sitting practice?** This focus on awareness of the body is what, for me, the teachings always kept leading to. The part of the Four Noble Truths that attracted me the most, for example, was the explanation about why we suffer. The Buddha's observation that we create upset for ourselves when we're in reaction, and that we manage to do this to ourselves through the twinned actions of desire and aversion, just rang true.

The teachings tell us that actions disturb our peace of mind, but what I'm suggesting is that we can't just look to what we conventionally call our mind to sort this out. Reaction, clinging, and aversion are physical actions that the body performs and that, no matter how subtle, create muscular tension through the repeated motions of either "pulling toward" (desire) or "pushing away" (aversion). Repeat anything often enough, and you create holding patterns in the body that predispose you to continue doing that action. Sitting practices that focus on relaxing the underlying tensions and holdings you feel in your body, as well as restrictions to the breath, help you mitigate the legacy and habit patterns of reacting, clinging, and aversion.

As the eleventh-century Mahamudra teacher Tilopa said, "Do nothing with the body but relax." When we start to relax, we start feeling the body. Tensions and contractions in the body serve as a numbing blanket that keeps the tiny physical sensations that exist on every part of the

body from being felt. Learning how to relax while remaining upright in the sitting posture allows the body's full range of sensations to come out of hiding and make their existence felt. It's always struck me as peculiar: If I know that sensations can be felt to exist everywhere in the body, then why don't I feel them? And what effect does blocking out awareness of feeling have on me? And finally, if the mind that is "lost in thought" is somehow dependent on my not feeling the sensations of the body, what happens to the mind if I let myself feel the entire body, head to toe, as an unbroken field of sensations? The sitting posture itself can be a kind of crucible for burning off the tensions and restrictions to body and breath that all too often keep us lost in thought and unaware of feeling presence.

A good place to start is examining what happens to the body when you're lost in thought. This, of course, is tricky to do, because when the mind is off wandering in involuntary thought, you're not very aware of the body at all. But if you can include an observation of the body while you're off in a thought, you'll find that the condition "lost in thought" is directly accompanied somewhere in the body by muscular contraction and tensing, stillness and rigidity, and a subtle contraction or holding quality to the breath. In other words, when you're lost in thought, you're tense in body. It follows, then, that if you can consciously work with the body during your sitting practice to soften and relax the tensions and allow more resilient and natural movement to accompany the passage of the breath, the chatter of the mind can be reduced, and your practice can start going really deep.

**Once we begin to burn off the tensions and restrictions, how is this release manifested in the mind and emotions?** Vipassana teachers speak of sankharas, the accumulated residues of resistance and reactions that we store in our bodies and that, through long, focused hours of medita-



tion, gradually come to the surface of awareness in the form of sensations (often not very pleasant ones). If we can simply feel them without reacting to them, they eventually burn themselves up and disappear, leaving a much more pleasurable shimmer in their place (that is, until the next deeper level of sankharas make their way to the surface to be felt, accepted, and released).

Wilhelm Reich, one of the earliest Western psychotherapists who became interested in how the energies of the body affect states of the mind, believed that what we call the unconscious is not stored in some remote repository in the brain but rather in the soft tissues of the body. Think about this for a moment, because it makes a lot of sense. Even though we know that sensations can be felt to exist on every part of the body down to the smallest cell, most people, most of the time, have very little conscious awareness of the felt presence of their bodies. In other words, we are unconscious of the presence of sensations, and so it is in the unfelt sensations of the body that the unconscious is to be found. I would suggest that most people, at any given moment, are probably only aware of 5 to 15 percent of their bodily sensations.

The work of Buddhism is to awaken, to come out of the sleepy dreams and notions of reality that we hold to be true and replace them with a direct experience of what is more accurately occurring. To awaken in this way, we need to become conscious of what's actually going on at the very depths of our experience.

**So when we unlock a particular physical tension, are we also releasing potentially difficult emotional aspects of the clinging or aversion that originally caused the tension? Many people report strong emotional reactions to bodywork—memories of a childhood trauma arising during massage therapy, for instance. In Buddhist terms, is this**

**our karma stored in the tension in our bodies?** For Western somatic therapists and Theravada Buddhists alike, much of the work that needs to be done is to rekindle a felt awareness of the whole body as a field of vibratory sensations. I sometimes joke with people that as we start to become aware of bodily sensations, we very quickly realize why we haven't wanted to feel them! We may have visions of relaxing the body and opening to an awareness of shimmering bodily sensations that feel like soft falling rain, but more often than not what we are first going to have to go through is a phase in which we feel highly intensified, sometimes very painful sensations, and through these periods of practice we face our karma directly. When we silently weep in our meditation practice over the discomfort we might be feeling, it is likely that a sankhara of sadness has come to the surface and is being released through that sensation of pain. When we get angry and irritated in our meditation because of what we might be feeling, it's likely that a sankhara of aversion has emerged out of the repository of our unconscious.

So when I speak of relaxing the tensions and holdings in the body and breath through sitting meditation practice, please don't think that I'm implying that everything is going to proceed like a pleasant Sunday outing in the country. More often than not, large emotional and physical storms may occur during practice before the skies clear. But if we can be courageous enough to work with the simple principles of alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience during our sitting practice [see "3 Keys," below], these storms do seem eventually to abate, and what appears in their place is worth the price of admission. Sometimes the clearing of the storms can take quite a bit of time (this is not fast-food therapy), and it is for this reason that I increasingly prefer to enter into retreats that last several weeks. Meditation practices that instruct students to focus solely on the activities and contents of what we conventionally

call the mind may unwittingly contribute to keeping contained the deep unconscious sankharas, which always appear as sensation. Many techniques can bring about a calming effect at the surface level of the mind, but if we're sincere about wanting to truly awaken and become truly conscious, we really need to embrace the experience of the body as a focus of our practice and allow the deeply unconscious and unfelt sensations to start coming out of hiding. And yes, this can be a very intensive undertaking, one definitely not for the faint of heart! But what, really, is our choice? We either face our karma and release the accumulated tensions of the past, or we continue to avoid feeling the reality of the body and enshrine the tensions forever.

**As you say, this does indeed sound like an intensive undertaking and one that many practitioners today may feel they simply don't have room for in their busy lives. When we sit down and encounter our deepest unconscious feelings first thing in the morning, how do we then get up and go about our day effectively? How can we approach this work in a manner that doesn't threaten to make us fall apart completely?** The kinds of emotional storms that we're talking about generally only erupt during long, intensive retreats. When we return home to our more familiar environment, things will settle out after a day or two, and so I don't think you really have to worry about falling apart while driving to work. If we're sincere about truly going deep and purifying out some of the residue of our karma, then I think an intensive retreat at least once a year is very important. When we come back from retreat, it's helpful to keep up our formal practice by sitting daily for an hour or for however long our schedule permits.

As important as formal practices undeniably are, I feel that it is even more important to view the rest of our lives as "informal" practice. What

I mean by this is that the awareness of embodied presence need not be confined to the time spent sitting on our meditation cushion. Every single moment provides an opportunity to relax the tendency to create tension in the body and unconscious thought patterns in the mind, and this can be a very gentle process. If intensive retreats are like turning up the flame on the stove, informal practice is like simmering at a low and steady heat that is practically unnoticeable and so allows you to go about your daily life without the emotional upheavals that can occur during more intensive periods of practice.

I think of informal practice as “embodied mindfulness.” In truth, every single moment of our lives presents us with a choice: either awaken to the reality of the present moment, or stay sleepy and push aspects of that reality away. Sensations are here every single moment. Why don’t we feel them? The visual field, in all its dazzling play, is here every moment that our eyes are open. Can we remember to look and actually see? Sounds are here constantly. Blocking them from our awareness creates a great deal of tension in the body.

Let alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience be your physical guides not only in your sitting practice but also as you go about your day. These three keys allow you to stay in touch with embodied presence. Merging an awareness of body with the awareness of vision and sound allows you to truly become one with this present moment. As you bring alignment, relaxation, and resilience into your daily life, your breath automatically becomes fuller and starts moving through your entire body, just as the Buddha suggested in his description of meditation. Without forcing a thing, let your breath breathe you: breathe into your entire body, and breathe out just as effortlessly. This condition, nothing more, nothing less, is really the reward and benefit of the practice. And in this way you can walk in full awareness through the city or country-

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side, like a knife cutting through the softest butter. Always be on the lookout not to bring any tension into this practice. Striving to attain this kind of awareness is simply self-defeating. Relax into presence. It's been there all the time.

### EXERCISE: DISSOLVING THOUGHT INTO SENSATION

Sensation and thought cannot easily coexist. Another way of saying this is that sensation and thought cannot occupy the same space. So, locate where your next thought is positioned in space. It's probably going to be somewhere around or inside your head, but it's definitely somewhere in your body. Find out where it is. Plot out its spatial coordinates. Where does it start and stop in your body? What shape is it?

Now shift your awareness. Remember: sensations exist in every part of the body, and thought and sensation cannot occupy the same space. So relax and let yourself start to feel the tactile sensations, the feeling presence, that also occupies that space. Just let the feeling presence in this space start to come forward. Where is your thought now?

### EXERCISE: EXPANDING SENSATION INTO PRESENCE

Never look upon the involuntary thought process of the mind as an enemy that needs to be subdued or vanquished. Look upon it instead as an infallible guide that is constantly "re-minding" you that you have momentarily lost awareness of sensations. Once you have dissolved thought into sensation in the area of your head, expand your awareness of sensations to include your entire body. Without bringing any tension into this

shifting of awareness, staying completely relaxed, feel the entire body from head to foot, all at once, as a unified field of tactile sensations.

Now expand your awareness to include the entire field of vision. Soften any tension around your eyes so that you can see the entire visual field all at once. Next include the entire field of sound. Be aware of every little bit of the ever-changing field of sound, as though you were listening to a symphony and hearing what every single instrument was playing.

Feel the entire body. See the entire visual field. Listen to everything that is here to be heard. Stay completely relaxed as you do this. In this condition of awakened presence, where have the thoughts gone? Where have YOU gone?

### 3 KEYS: ALIGNMENT, RELAXATION, AND SURRENDERED RESILIENCE

*Alignment:* The tallest skyscrapers and trees are only able to attain their remarkable height because of their vertical alignment. Gravity supports structures that are balanced and aligned in this way. If you can consciously, but effortlessly, bring the major segments of your body into a predominantly vertical alignment, gravity will support you as well.

*Relaxation:* The purpose of alignment is that it allows us to relax. A body that is not aligned relies on constant muscular tension to remain upright, for if it were to relax its tension, it would fall to the ground. Tension blocks out our awareness of sensations, so once we are able to relax, we can start to feel the body and our formerly unfelt sensations start emerging.

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*Surrendered resilience:* To stay relaxed, the entire body must be able to remain in subtle but constant movement, like an amoeba that continually expands and contracts. Breath, for example, can be felt to move through the entire body, causing subtle movement to occur at every joint. If we resist this natural bodily movement by holding ourselves still, we will bring tension back into our body, forfeit our relaxation, lose awareness of sensations, and yet again become lost in the involuntary story lines of our mind.

7

# TOUCHING ENLIGHTENMENT

After years of meditation, you may feel you're making very little progress. But the guide you may need has been with you all along: your body. Drawing on Tibetan Yogic practices, Reggie Ray takes on the modern crisis of disembodiment.

REGGIE RAY

During my own practice and teaching of meditation over the past thirty-five years, many things have surprised me, but none more than the growing and somewhat anguished realization that simply practicing meditation doesn't necessarily yield results. Many of us, when we first encountered Buddhism, found its invitation to freedom and realization through meditation extraordinarily compelling. We jumped in with a lot of enthusiasm, rearranged life priorities around our meditation, and put much time and energy into the practice.

Some, engaging meditation in such a focused way, discover the kind of continually unfolding transformation they are looking for. But more often than not, that doesn't happen. It is true that when we practice meditation on a daily basis, we often find a definite sense of relief and peace. Even over a period of a year or two we may feel that things are moving in a positive direction in terms of reducing our internal agitation and



developing openness. All of this has its value.

But if we have been practicing for twenty or thirty years—or even just a few—it is not uncommon to find ourselves arriving in a quite different and far more troubling place. We may feel that somewhere along the line we have lost track of what we are doing and that things have somehow gotten bogged down. We may find that the same old habitual patterns continue to grip us. The same disquieting emotions, the same interpersonal blockages and basic life confusion, the same unfulfilled and agonizing spiritual longing that led us to meditation in the first place keeps arising. Was our original inspiration defective? Is there something wrong with the practices or the traditions we are following? Is there something wrong with us? Have we misapplied the instructions, or are we perhaps just not up to them?

In an early Theravada meditation text, the phrase “touching enlightenment with the body” is used to describe the attainment of ultimate spiritual realization. It is interesting, if a bit puzzling, that we are invited not to see enlightenment, but to *touch* it—not with our thought or our mind, but with our *body*. What can this possibly mean? In what way can the body be thought to play such a central and fundamental role in the life of meditation? This question becomes all the more interesting and compelling in our contemporary context, when so many people are acutely feeling their own personal disembodiment and finding themselves strongly drawn to somatic practices and therapies of all kinds.

My sense is that there is a very real problem among Western Buddhist practitioners. We are attempting to practice meditation and to follow a spiritual path in a disembodied state, and our practice is therefore doomed to failure. The full benefits and fruition of meditation cannot be experienced or enjoyed when we are not grounded in our bodies. The phrase from the early text, when understood fully, implies not only that

we are *able* to touch enlightenment with our bodies, but that we *must* do so—that in fact there is no other way to touch enlightenment except in and through our bodies.

For most of us, and for most of modern culture, the body is principally seen as the object of our ego agendas, the donkey for the efforts of our ambitions. The donkey is going to be thin, the donkey is going to be strong, the donkey is going to be a great yoga practitioner, the donkey is going to look and feel young, the donkey is going to work eighteen hours a day, the donkey is going to help me fulfill my needs, and so on. All that is necessary is the right technique. There is no sense that the body might actually be more intelligent than “me,” my precious self, my conscious ego.

For me, and for many people I know, there is a kind of divine intervention that arrives at our doorstep and calls us back to our body. This can take many forms: injury, illness, extreme fatigue, impending old age, sometimes emotions, feelings, anxiety, anguish, or dread that we don’t understand and can’t handle. But at a certain point we start to get pulled back into our body. One way or the other, something comes in, sometimes with a terrifying crash, and begins to wake us up.

When we operate in a disembodied state, we tend to understand the experiences of our life as random, relatively insignificant, and boring. We go to great lengths to try to find something interesting or significant in our life. The more boring and gray everything gets, the more we look to sex or violence or mind-altering substances or *anything* that can give us some kind of rush—anything to break through the phenomenal boredom and general meaninglessness of our existence. We may find ourselves thinking, “Next week I’m going to this great restaurant where maybe I can have a meal I actually enjoy,” or “Next month I’m going on vacation and maybe then I will be in a place that will actually catch my

attention and mean something,” and so on.

According to the Yogachara teachings of Indian Buddhism, the problem with our life does not lie in the individual circumstances or occurrences of our day-to-day existence. It’s not that they’re inherently meaningless and boring. The problem is that we *make* them meaningless and boring; because we are so invested in maintaining our own sense of self, we actually don’t relate to anything in a direct way. Unwilling to fully live the life that is arriving in our bodies moment by moment, we find ourselves left with no real life at all. In our state of disembodied dissatisfaction we may think, “I feel like I’m disconnected. Maybe I need to change my job, or change my relationship, maybe, maybe, maybe.” But the fact is that the fullness of our human existence is already happening all the time. By drawing on Tibetan Yoga practices, which explore the body from within, we can learn to allow the experience of the body to communicate with our conscious mind and to become known to us in a direct way. As we begin to open up our awareness in this way, we can find intensity, meaning, fullness, and fulfillment in the most mundane details of our life.

The Buddha said, “I follow the ancient way.” He lived in northeast India at a time of increasing agriculturalization and urbanization with all of their attendant consequences. For his part, he left aside the compelling social changes around him and retired to the jungle—in Indian thought, the nonhuman locale where the primordial may be discovered. When the Buddha touched the earth as witness of his attainment, he separated himself decisively from the disembodiment increasingly sought by so many spiritual teachers and traditions of his own day, including his own previous meditation teachers and the dominant Hindu Samkhya-Yoga system. The Buddha made, I think, the journey back that I am suggesting here, and left as his legacy the full embodiment that

Buddhist meditation, in its traditional context, represents.

In the classical Buddhist traditions, meditation is deeply somatic—it is fully grounded in sensations, sensory experience, feeling, emotions, and so on. Even thoughts are related to as somatic—as bursts of energy experienced in the body, rather than nonphysical phenomena that disconnect us from our bodies. In its most ancient Buddhist form, meditation is a technique for letting go of the objectifying tendency of thought and of entering deeply and fully into communion with our embodied experience. And hence it leads to “touching enlightenment with the body.”

And yet, among many of us modern people, meditation is often practiced as a kind of conceptual exercise, a mental gymnastic. We often approach it as a way to fulfill yet another agenda or project—that of attempting to become “spiritual,” according to whatever we happen to think that is. We may try to use meditation to become peaceful, sharper, more “open,” more effective in our lives, even more conceptually adroit. The problem with this is that we are attempting to be managers, to supersede nature, to control “the other.” In this case, the “other” is ourselves, our bodies, and our own experience. Ultimately, it is our own somatic experience of reality that we are trying to override in the attempt to fulfill our ego aim.

Often we have an ideal of what meditation is or should be—what we like about meditation, which might be some experience that we’ve had somewhere along the way—and we actually end up trying to use our meditation as a way to recreate that particular state of mind. We try to recreate the past instead of stepping out toward the future. To put the matter in bald terms, we end up using meditation as a method to perpetuate and increase our disembodiment from the call and the imperatives of our actual lives.

This is what the psychologist John Welwood calls *spiritual bypassing*. Meditation becomes a way to perpetuate self-conscious agendas and avoid impending, perhaps painful or fearful developmental tasks—always arising from the darkness of our bodies—that are nevertheless necessary for any significant spiritual growth. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called it *spiritual materialism*, using spiritual practice to reinforce existing, neurotic ego strategies for sealing ourselves off from our actual lives in the pursuit of survival, comfort, continuity, and security. When we use meditation in such a way, we aren't really going anywhere, just perpetuating the problems we already have. No wonder when we practice like this over a period of decades, we can end up feeling that nothing fundamental is really happening: because it isn't.

I am not certain that our Asian teachers, who come from very different cultural situations, always understand the full extent of our own disembodiment or the tremendous limitations it imposes on our ability to meditate and pursue the path. Nor do the classical Buddhist texts, at least as we understand them, necessarily provide a direct and effective remedy to our situation either.

Consider, for example, the meditation technique that is so central in the texts and so often given to modern meditators: pay attention to the breath at the tip of the nose, either feeling the in-breath and the out-breath or attending to the breath there in some other way. For a fully embodied person, this is an effective technique by which the practitioner can make his or her journey. But for someone who is somatically disconnected and habitually abides almost entirely in his or her head, using a technique that requires attention on the nose will reinforce the tendency to remain entirely invested in the head and to continue to be unaware of the rest of the body. If we are already out of touch with our body, its sensations, and its life, carrying out a practice that involves attending to

the breath at the nostrils often just perpetuates and even reinforces our disconnection. Those of us meditating in such a disembodied state are locked into a cycle and genuinely trapped in our practice.

When the body calls us back, we begin to find that we have a partner on the spiritual path that we didn't know about—the body itself. In our meditation and in our surrounding lives, the body becomes a teacher, one that does not communicate in words but tends to speak out of the shadows. Moreover, rather than being able to require the body to adapt to our conscious ideas and intentions, we find that we have to begin to learn the language that the body naturally speaks. As we come under the tutelage of the body, we often think we know what is going on, only to discover, over and over, that we have completely missed the point. And then, just when we think we are completely confused, we come to see that we have understood something much more profound and far-reaching than anything we could have imagined. It is all very puzzling but, in meditating with the body as our guide, we come to feel that, perhaps for the first time in our lives, we are in the presence of a being, our own body, that is wise, loving, flawlessly reliable, and, strange to say, worthy of our deepest devotion.

In entering into this process of developing somatic awareness, we are not simply making peace with our physical existence. In fact, we are entering into a process that lies right at the heart of the spiritual life itself, something the Buddha saw a very long time ago. He saw that while spiritual strategies of disembodiment may yield apparent short-term gains, in the long run they land us right back in the mess we began with, perhaps more deeply than before.

In meditating with the body, the awareness itself is being retrained and reeducated. We begin to live our life as a continual welling up from the depths of our soma, of our pores, our tissues, and our cells. Rather

than thinking that the conscious mind is or should be the engineer of our lives, we begin to realize that the conscious mind is actually more appropriately the handmaiden of the body. The body becomes the continual source of what we need in order to live, the unending fount of the water of life. A very interesting teaching in the Yogachara tradition states that it is part of the human situation to try to maintain a certain self-image or self-representation, what Buddhists today refer to as the “the self,” the “I” or ego. The attempt to maintain the “integrity” of this continuous, solid sense of ourselves leads us to be very resistant to—in fact, to ignore—information that is inconsistent with that image. And this means that we have a huge amount of information, moment by moment, to block out.

According to the Yogachara, as we live our lives, the body itself is a completely nonjudgmental receiver of experience. These days there is much talk about creating effective personal boundaries. But the interesting point is that you actually can’t put up boundaries around your body. The boundaries happen up top, in the head. The body is open, the body is sensitive, the body is vulnerable, the body is intelligent, and the body is completely beyond judgment. From the body’s viewpoint, whether we like or dislike what is occurring in the world is irrelevant. Whatever occurs in our environment, our body receives.

While the body receives experience in a completely open and non-judgmental way, because of our investment in who we think we are and our efforts to maintain this self, we refuse to receive a great part of what the body knows and feels and understands, “we” meaning our conscious self, our conscious mind, our ego. An experience occurs on a somatic level, and we say “no,” or we say, “I want this part of what happened but not that part,” but we don’t simply accept what the body knows in a straightforward way. This is what Buddhism calls ignorance. Ignorance



is not being unintelligent, uninformed, or deluded. Ignorance is actually incredibly intelligent. Ignorance means that we block out the wisdom and knowledge already abiding in our body that is inconsistent with who we think we are or are striving to be.

This leads to another most important question: what happens to all that denied and rejected experience that we are already holding in our bodies? Simply put, all that somatic awareness and experience is walled off from our consciousness. It abides in a no-man's land in our tissues, our muscles, our ligaments and tendons, our blood, our bones. The literally organic journey our somatic experience is making toward consciousness is aborted, and it gets jammed back into itself. And there it stays, in a kind of unhealthy stagnation where, in some instances, it may be unlocked by a body worker years or even decades later as a release of "trauma." But as with our "traumas," so with virtually every moment of our lives, the full range of our experience is not admitted, but is pushed back and walled off where it abides hidden in the body.

This rejection of the fullness of our experience is what Buddhism means by the *creation of karma*. The residue of experience that has not been lived through is, in Buddhist terms, the *karma of result*, wherein previously created karma results in limitations on our present awareness. In other words, the experience that is pushed back and walled off into the body is not in the least inactive. It continues to function as that which our conscious standpoint, in order to maintain itself, must continually strive to ignore. It is much like moving around a party, trying to avoid a particular person. All of your moves, while seemingly free and consistent with the wants and desires of your "party objectives," are actually largely defined by trying to prevent any encounter with the unwanted guest.

We could speak of the rejected experience, the somatic knowledge



that we wall off, as our unlived life. It is that part of our human existence, and often a very large part, that we do not feel, engage, accommodate, or incorporate. It is something that has come to our body, for whatever reason, but that we have allowed to go no further. Many of us feel that life is passing us by, that we are missing what our life could be. We don't know why we feel that way or what to do about it. When viewed from the point of view of the body, however, this unlived life is precisely the life that is already ours, but that we are avoiding out of our desire to maintain our ego status quo. Of course we long for this life, and of course our sense of missing it can be excruciating. Meditating with the body provides a way for us to reconnect with our unlived life and, gradually and over time, to learn how to live in a more complete and satisfying way.

What is involved in meditating in an embodied way and inhabiting the body in our practice? Initially we are talking about really paying attention to the body in a direct and nonconceptual way. This involves very focused work and work that requires regularity and long-term commitment. In fact, I would say that once one “catches on” to what meditating with the body is all about, one enters a path that will unfold as long as there is life. At the same time, the experiential impact of the work is immediately felt, so there is confirmation of the rightness of what we are doing and a natural trust in the process that is beginning to unfold.

Meditating with the body involves learning, through a variety of practices, how to reside fully within our bodies. What we are doing is not quite learning a technique and we are not quite learning how to “do” something—rather we are readjusting the focal length and domain of our consciousness. Thus we gradually arrive at an awareness that is actually *in our bodies* rather than in our heads. It's not something you actually learn to do, it's a way of learning how to be differently.

In the teachings of Tibetan yoga, it is suggested that we can use our

breathing to move the situation forward. Tibetan yoga speaks about the outer breath, our normal respiration, and also about the inner breath, our life force or *prana*. The outer breath holds the inner breath, as a sheath of a plant holds its pith. When we bring our attention to the outer breath, we gain access to our inner breath, our *prana*. Whatever location in the body we direct our attention to, there the *prana* will go.

According to Tibetan teaching, we can quickly and strongly bring our *prana* to a certain location in our body by visualizing that we are breathing into it. We might do this by visualizing that we are bringing the breath into our body from the outside, through the skin, for example; or, we might visualize that we are just breathing directly into a location, such as the interior of the lower belly. Now here is the key point: wherever our attention goes, the *prana* goes, and the *prana* carries awareness right to that point. By directing the *prana*, we are able to bring awareness to any location within our body.

At first, for example, we put our awareness into our abdomen or into our heart center or into our limbs, into our feet, into our fingers, or toes. Although initially it does feel as if we are putting our awareness into those places, as time goes on we begin to sense that what is *really* happening is that those places themselves are already aware and we are tuning into the awareness that already exists, not just in these particular places, but throughout the entire body. We begin to develop more subtlety, and we gradually become aware of our tendons and ligaments, tiny muscles in out-of-the-way places, our organs, our bones, our circulatory system, our heart, and so on. Through that practice there slowly comes about a kind of shift in emphasis, a shift in the way we are aware as people. Habitually, there predominates in us a “daylight consciousness,” which most people experience in their heads as a kind of being up front and toward what we want consciously or intend for our lives. This

kind of consciousness is really a way of being very focused on what we think, of bringing into awareness things that are in some way important to the project of “me.”

But when we are asked to place our awareness in our bodies, something different begins to happen. Often, when we begin to do this kind of interior work, we can't feel anything at all. Some of us may feel like we don't even have a body. But through the practices, we begin to be able to see in the dark, so to speak. We begin to become aware that a larger world is beginning to unfold at the boundaries of awareness. The only thing you see in the daylight is what *you* want to see; when you turn the lights off in the night, you see what *wants* to be seen, which is a whole different story. It's not something we can focus on with our usual self-serving consciousness, but nevertheless, this information begins to come to us in a very subtle way. We discover that the body actually wants to be seen in certain ways. This is a rather surprising discovery for many of us. We can't imagine the idea that the body might be a living force, a source of intelligence, wisdom, even something we might experience as possessing intention. We cannot conceive of the body as a subject.

We may begin with absence of feeling or numbness, but as we continue breathing, the places where we are breathing may begin to show signs of life, and we may become aware of some faint sensation. As we continue breathing into the various locations in our body, we are likely to discover blockages and discomfort. People often uncover vivid pains and discomfort they were only subliminally aware of or perhaps were completely unaware of. They may realize that they feel like throwing up all the time. They may sense they are very, very tight or hard in their lower belly or their throat or their joints. They come to see that nothing is really flowing and that there are certain places where they are completely shut down. While some places feel very hard and armored, others

feel incredibly vulnerable, unprotected, shaky, and weak. One side feels shorter or smaller than the other. One side feels alive, the other dead. Everything is out of kilter, and we are filled with distress of all kinds. We want to scream or run, or jump out of our bodies. This initial step involves getting to know a body that is in a lot of discomfort, holding a lot of claustrophobia and a lot of pain. As our awareness develops, we begin to realize that our habitual—if subliminal—response to our somatic distress is an unconscious or barely conscious pattern of freezing: we are holding on for dear life, fearful and paranoid, tensing our body and our self so we won't have to feel.

At this point, the practitioner is instructed to receive the information of uncomfortable or even painful tension into his or her awareness without comment, judgment, or reaction. When we do so, we begin to notice that a certain area of tension is coming forward, as it were, presenting itself with special insistence to us. It clearly wants to be known, above all other potential areas. In addition, it comes with a very specific calling card, a particular portrait of feeling and energy. More than this, the area of tension comes as an invitation—it calls for release. Now at first, we might find this call painful and frustrating because we don't see how we can heed the call and act upon it. After all, it is the body's tension, right?

But the invitation for release, to be discerned in the very tension itself, also brings critical information with it: it is actually us, our own conscious, intentional, focal awareness, that is responsible for the tension in the first place. It is our own overlay, so to speak, that is creating this feeling of freezing. As this becomes clear, we begin to discover that we have the capability to take responsibility for the tension, to enter into the soma, to feel how it is actually *us* that is holding on. At this point, we can, indeed, release. We have to let go of ourselves, we have to feel

that the unpleasant tension is our own paranoid holding on, and we have to open, relax, surrender, and let go. This represents a leap into the unknown.

As we move through the process of discovery, it may begin to dawn on us that the body itself has an agenda that it wants us to follow. The agenda begins with some region or part of the body coming forward to meet our awareness, presenting itself with a certain energy, texture, and demeanor, alerting us to our holding, and then inviting us into the process of release and relaxation. The interesting thing here is that we are dealing with something that is not us, it is not the conscious mind, it's not like "Okay, I have a back problem, I'm going to use this bodywork to solve my back problem." That's imposing our agenda on the body. The body is going to say, "Nope. We are going to start with the arches of the feet. This is where we are going to start." And then the next day it's the calves, the next day it's the neck, and then the next day or the next month it's under the shoulder blades, under the clavicles, within the interior of the chest. In other words, the body itself actually gives us the routine. It gives us the protocols and it gives us the journey.

In this work, we are called to let go of what we think we want or think we need, and listen deeply; we are invited to surrender to the invitations that come forward from the body to become aware and to open, relax, and let go. Through that process there is a gradual shift from feeling that the body is an object or a tool of our ego, to realizing that the body is the source of something that constantly calls to us with a primal voice that commands our attention and engages us in a process that we find extraordinarily compelling, even though we cannot fully understand what is going on.

When people do this bodywork thoroughly and deeply, whatever personal issues they may have turn up somatically. They appear in a way

that is according to the timetable of the body, not of our ego-consciousness. It is amazing how literal it can be. People who have difficulty with self-expression may feel at a certain point that they are being strangled because they sense the energy collecting at the throat and are unable to move. People who are unaware of their emotions may experience their heart as if in a vice. Such extraordinarily literal somatic experiences can be very painful and difficult. It is clear why people numb themselves because basically, who wants to feel that? But when we understand that these sorts of discoveries are part of regaining balance, energy, healing, and a more wholesome relationship to ourselves, it's a whole different story. We begin to have confidence in the pain that we run into, and the blockages, because we have tools that we feel have some hope of leading us through. In each new experience, we bring awareness to our bodies, feel the blockage, find the invitation to release, surrender our hold, and experience the relaxation, sense of unknowing, and open space that result when we do.

In this process, we become acquainted with our body in ever new ways. As we continue, we may feel almost as if each particular part of our body is opening like a flower. We find a sense of vitality and life and energy in each part of our body. We begin to realize that each part likewise has its own very specific and unique awareness-profile, if you will, its own personality, its own living truth. It has its own reason for being, its own relation to the "us" of our conscious awareness, and its own things to communicate in an ongoing way. With each part of the body there is a similar whole world that opens up and is available for discovery when we begin working with it. With each new discovery, who "we" are grows deeper, more subtle, more connected, and more open and extended. All of this unfolds from that first experience of numbness.

When asked "How do you exhaust karma?" Chögyam Trung-

pa Rinpoche simply said, “When things come up in your life, you feel them completely and fully and you don’t hold back. You live them right through until they have completed themselves.” This applies to whatever is arising for us, not just what is painful, but what is pleasurable as well. When we are blissful and happy, we go along to a certain point but then pull back because we are afraid—perhaps it is too much and we feel we are losing our sense of self, or perhaps we are afraid it will slip away. This is because true bliss and true happiness, perhaps even more so than pain, are a negation of the human ego.

In the Yogachara teachings, within the “storehouse consciousness”—what we call the unconscious—are all the memories, all the experiences that we have not fully lived through. This understanding works well with modern psychological thinking. The process of the path to enlightenment, which can be demonstrated from the very earliest texts onward, is allowing the unconscious contents of our life to arrive in our awareness and to allow awareness to integrate what we find about ourselves and about the world. According to Buddhism, the unconscious is the body. Through working with the body in the way that I am describing, we actually are able to unlock and unleash all of these experiences and all of these things that have been insufficiently experienced and are therefore held throughout the body.

That’s why it is said in the Tibetan Yoga traditions that the body actually holds our own enlightenment. Until we are willing to live through some of the wealth of information and emotions that have been offered to us but rejected, our awareness remains tied up and restricted. The way they put it in the tradition is that the experience of working with the body unlocks memories and images and emotions that become fuel. This fuel creates a fire in us, a fire of all the vivid and intense pain held by these previously rejected aspects of experience. That pain is a fire that



## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: BODY IN PRACTICE

gradually burns up the structure of our ego—it is a visceral inferno. It is said that this inferno purifies awareness and makes the field of awareness very, very bright. The more we do the work, the more our awareness actually opens up. According to the early tradition, enlightenment itself is when the fuel is all used up. Awareness, no longer tied up in evasionary tactics, is set free and liberated to its full extent.

Through the work, we begin to discover some fundamental shifts in the way we are. There is a rich interior life of the body that we feel and experience, but which also somehow remains shrouded in mystery. At a certain point, we realize that we can't tell whether something is physical or energetic, whether it is emotion or sensation, and we realize that we don't need to figure it out. It begins to unfold. The so-called self, that relatively consistent type of person we have always been trying to be, becomes much less important, and there's a willingness on the part of the meditator, or the body contemplator, to allow the self, the conscious sense of self, to die and be reborn, over and over.

### DIGGING DEEP: A GUIDED EARTH BREATHING MEDITATION FROM REGGIE RAY

The first step in regaining our embodiment as meditators is to establish a clear, open, and intimate connection with our larger, macrocosmic “body,” the earth itself. In this practice, we will explore how the body can be felt as an incarnation of the earth. Earth breathing enables us to deepen our connection with the earth and to explore our identity with the earth itself. This practice also enables us to feel the support the earth offers us. The more we allow ourselves to feel supported by the earth, the more we are able to identify with the earth, the more room we allow



ourselves for the inner journey.

Take a good meditation posture and feel the earth under you. Even if you are on a cushion in a room on the sixth floor of a building, you are still supported by the earth. You may initially want to keep your eyes closed. Begin breathing into the perineum, the region between the genital area and the anus. Bring your breath into the bottom of your pelvis at the perineum. Feel any tension you may have in the perineum. Breathe in through your sitz bones. Let the bottom of your pelvis sink into the earth. Breathe into the area of your anal region and your genitals. With each out-breath, let your pelvis sink more and more deeply into the earth, so that you are sitting completely and without any reservation on the earth. Bring the energy of the breath up into the hollow of the lower belly.

Now begin to breathe into a point that is a few inches below your perineum, putting you in direct contact with the earth. We are extending our awareness beneath our body, into the earth. Bring the energy of the earth up into your body. Now reach a few inches lower and then a foot lower. You are literally reaching with your awareness down into the earth and breathing up through your bottom.

With each breath, let your awareness drop down a little further into the earth. Breathe in the inner breath, the inner energy of the earth. Sink lower and lower into the darkness of the earth, breathing the energy up. On the in-breath, you are bringing the energy up, and on the out-breath, you are dropping further down. As you breathe in, allow your attention to remain deep inside the earth.

Continue in this way, letting your mind sink down into the darkness of the earth with each out-breath. Allow yourself to come right to the point where you feel you are about to go to sleep, but stay present, and take the attitude that you are sinking into a mysterious realm where

all the answers you have ever sought are waiting. Try to be awake yet hovering on the boundary of sleep. On each out-breath let yourself sink a bit deeper, and take note of whatever images arise. Try to sense the extraordinary stillness and peace of the earth.

After about ten minutes, let your awareness drop more precipitously, further into the earth: one hundred feet, two hundred feet, a mile. See how far you can reach. Continue to breathe the earth's energy up into your lower belly, going further down each time. Then let the bottom drop out and let your awareness go in a downward freefall. As your awareness descends, gradually have the sense that the energy is filling your body: into your belly, your mid-chest, your upper chest, and your head. Keep reaching down, deeper and deeper. Continue reaching further and further, while continuing to let the energy further up into your body. We are now receiving the awakened energy of the earth in our entire body.

To conclude this practice session, transition by dropping all techniques. Simply sit in your body, feeling your body as a mountain, still and immovable, and notice the awake and present quality of your mind.

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8

LOSING OUR BODIES,  
LOSING OUR MINDS

When did we leave our bodies—and how do we come back?

STUART SMITHERS

We were once self-luminous beings who fed on joy, lived in a state of bliss, were made of attention, and could go wherever we wished. But according to the Buddhist story of creation in the Mahavastu, one of us ate a mouthful of the “essence of earth,” and other beings, seeing his pleasure, followed suit. So began our descent. As the beings ate more of this ordinary food, their bodies became heavy, rough, and hard, and all of the luminous qualities were lost.

Where do we find ourselves now? According to the Mahavastu, violence and suffering arise from our appetites, our desire, our greed to feed the impulses of pleasure that have their source in the heavy bodies that cover up our original nature. We live in bodies of desire. But if I catch a glimpse of myself at some random moment during the day, the chances are good that I will find myself in my mind. I will discover that I am daydreaming, or rehearsing a conversation I am about to have or have just finished, or planning my escape from work. I might even be concentrating on some problem that needs my attention, like organizing a lecture or figuring out how to make the month’s mortgage payment.

Whatever the source of my musings, this much is true: like so many people, I am living in my head.

In the movie version of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, Robin Williams plays the King of the Moon, and through his role he throws into comic relief the illusory life of modern men and women living under a lunar influence. The King of the Moon appears as a disembodied head, floating and spinning in space. He is arrogant, self-congratulatory, cocky, taking his limitless freedom for granted as he coldly and condescendingly imparts his wisdom to everyone below. But there is one problem: he has forgotten his body.

Throughout most of the movie, the king's body remains offscreen. When the body does appear, it exposes most embarrassingly the illusion of his autonomy: the body, it would seem, has a mind of its own. And the moon, like a kite on an invisible string, is suddenly subject to the powerful tug of the flesh. His body is suffering independently through its own desires and interests, distracted mainly by the pleasures of eating and the body of the queen. The king is split in two—a mind and a body—and out of that split all the inconvenient questions of self-identity, freedom, and unity arise. The king's unresolved and cyclical suffering speaks for humanity; with him we can say (in St. Augustine's words):

"I have become a problem to myself."

Our dismay at the rude realization that the body is not our ready servant is similar to the king's distress. Quickly, we avert our heads, treating the body as an object, as the source of all our problems and suffering. Our separate body is, at the very least, an unpredictable, unreliable, and unknown companion with which we are very uncomfortable. Some of that discomfort comes from desire, from our sense of needs both real and imaginary.

In Buddhism, the cyclical suffering of samsara is fueled by one's

desire-nature. Craving depends on an automatic arising of feelings of like or dislike, of pleasure or pain, and some early practitioners sought release with ritualistic asceticism and self-denial. But through our alienation from our own bodies, we drive ourselves ever farther away from ourselves. We become dis-embodied.

Experiencing the world dualistically is a habit of mind that Buddhism and other traditions have addressed throughout the ages. However, through Buddhism, and especially through the practice of meditation, we discover that the sense of self—the subject—is changing all the time, just as the object—that which is seen, heard, smelled, touched, and tasted by the subject-self—changes. But we begin to see that the cause of samsaric existence is not dualism *per se*; rather, it is the emotional impulses that *result* from conceptualization, such as liking and disliking, that give rise to samsara.

Ultimately, our overidentification with the head—with what we think, with the thoughts and dreams that arise from our worrying, imagining, heavy heads—is a habit reinforced by our modern material and cultural conditions. We have withdrawn into our heads more and more as the conditions of contemporary life have become progressively less balanced. Today, as we move through the postindustrial information age, the body that concurrently thinks *and* works is rapidly disappearing; physical work is limited more and more to our fingers, pushing buttons on everything from computer keyboards and cell phones to Palm Pilots and Game Boys. We are losing not only our heads but our bodies as well.

Our culture is arriving at the point where “embodied thought” is an oxymoron; our estrangement from our embodied selves is so complete it renders the body largely invisible. As we withdraw into the thought-world, we develop the belief that the body is an extension of the self and

that it will serve the self, that it will serve *me*. Ignorant of dependent origination and the unfolding processes of life's influences and action, when anything happens we habitually claim, "I did it," blindly unaware of the contingent forces, fears, and attractions that actually led to that result. But despite the dominant cultural myth that the head controls the body, the connection between the two is far more complex. Consider a study done several years ago on the habits of smokers: researchers found that movement of the body—the arm reaching for a cigarette—preceded the thought *I want a cigarette*. Who is leading whom? Where does the origin of action reside?

This way of thinking about the body and head is not at all foreign to modern thinkers. So-called "Freudian slips" demonstrate in their often salacious puns the ungrounded body, blurting out its King-of-the-Moon urges. When our real situation dawns on us, when we begin to feel the palpable realities of being embodied, the body appears as a problem, and the training of asceticism may begin. The body and the material world are seen as impure, corrupt, ephemeral, shadowed, transient, and dominated by the principle of death. For the Buddha, perhaps there was also an element of fear when he began the journey toward liberation. Without knowing the body in depth, we recoil from the confusion and persistence of impulses that drive us, despite our intentions. We begin to see the body as the enemy, and images of heaven, liberation, and deathlessness take on a transcendental quality—that the body and the world are to be escaped *from*, and we flee the world and embodiment.

But before we reject this ascetic mode entirely, we need to consider the countless stories—from Buddha to Milarepa to Bodhidharma—of self-initiated struggle, and of teachers who made extraordinary demands on their disciples. These teachers worked with the connections between physical and intellectual practices to energize and inspire the spiritual

path of their students.

When he was twenty-seven, the great Dzogchen master Longchen Rabjam met his guru, Rigdzin Kumaradza. While studying with his teacher, Longchen Rabjam lived under conditions of severe deprivation, with meager food and hardly any protection against the Tibetan winter. Like the other disciples, Longchen Rabjam lived in a tent or a makeshift lean-to. As Tulku Thondup notes in *The Practice of Dzogchen*: “To combat the development of attachment, it was the Lama’s teaching to move the camp from one no-man’s-land to another. During one spring alone, they moved camp nine times, and that caused great hardship to Longchen Rabjam. Just as he got settled, the time would come to move again.” The hardships that Longchen Rabjam experienced on these moves were not a rejection or devaluation of the body; they were conditions that revealed the conflict between his wish for liberation and the desires of his body.

Great yogis and yoginis see and experience the depth and breadth of their attachment, their slavery to likes and dislikes, pleasure and pain. The struggle is not easy, and a real conflict exists between one’s intentions: one’s wish to become free (*bodhicitta*) and the desires of the body and mind. Does one want comfort or truth? Would one choose pleasure or freedom? In a moment of real struggle not to give in to the body’s desire, a new awareness can appear—an awareness that is neither attracted nor repulsed, that is separate and free from the forces of like and dislike. One begins to value this new awareness (and the quality of freedom that arises with it) more than the avoidance of pain or the indulgence of pleasure. As the ordinary body and mind experience the friction of conflict, they become more subtle, available to more refined qualities of consciousness, feeling, and awareness.

A realization story repeated by the late Dzogchen master Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche in *As It Is* reflects a movement toward agendaless aware-

ness. It concerns the first Sabchu Rinpoche:

Before he died, a horrible disease struck him; his stomach became one big, open sore. Finally, all his intestines were lying out in his lap. The pus, liquids, and blood ran out onto the floor, all the way out to the door. There were definitely bodily sensations, and he wanted to scratch at it all the time, so he asked to have his hands tied. They were tied with a white scarf to stop him from scratching. His disciples said, “Oh Rinpoche! This must be so difficult; it must be really painful for you.” He said, “I’m not sick at all; there is nothing wrong with me.” They said, “How terrible, all the pus and blood is flowing down the floor.” He answered, “There is an old monk sitting on this bed; he seems to be moving around quite uncomfortably. He wants to scratch his belly, but for me there is nothing wrong at all. I am not sick at all. However, there is someone who looks like me sitting right here. He seems to be suffering quite a bit, but I am fine.”

As Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche comments: “If you are stable in practice, it is like that.” There may be suffering, but one is no longer identified with it.

Still, the body is not only a source of suffering, but also the potential source of a mysterious wisdom; as we are transformed through struggle and practice, the awakening body reveals what has been concealed. We read in the *Sambhuti*:

The great wisdom dwells in the body, Fully away from all thoughts.  
It dwells in the body but is not produced by the body.



One's being is revealed in materiality, in embodiment. Sri Anirvan, a great Baul—a member of an ancient order of singers in northern India—wrote, “All spiritual experiences are sensations in the body. They are simply a graded series of sensations, beginning with the solidity of earth and passing gradually, in full consciousness, through liquidness and the emanation of heat to that of a total vibration before reaching the Void.”

The body appears as the witness of one's being, a matrix in which awareness is reflected in the arising, release, ordering, and circulation of energies. The awakened body of meditation and discipline is experienced energetically, and Buddhist tradition establishes a language, often symbolic, that reveals the exact nature of the more subtle structures of our embodied nature and the patterns of energy that appear. For the great yogi Milarepa, years of solitary meditation under extreme conditions—and with little regard for his body's comforts or needs—culminated in a decisive moment when, after eating and drinking more substantially, he felt his progress had stopped utterly, and he was unable to meditate. The moment had been anticipated by his guru, Marpa, who had given him a scroll to be opened at this time. The scroll gave Milarepa essential advice on improving his practice, telling him specifically to take good food at this time. Upon taking Marpa's advice, Milarepa recognized a mysterious transformation that was taking place in his body:

I understood that, through the force of my former perseverance in meditation, my nerves had absorbed creative energy. Due to my inferior food, the energy remained inactive. . . Following the directions on the scroll, I worked hard on the vital exercises recommended for body, breathing, and meditation. As a result, the obstructions in the smaller nerves as well as those in the median

nerves were cleared away. I attained an experience of joy, lucidity, and pure awareness similar to what I had known about in theory.

—*Lhalungpa, The Life of Milarepa*

The struggle begins to reveal an openness. My wish to struggle with myself is no longer a wish to be free from pain (and certainly not a wish to be free *from* my body), but a wish to be *free*. The body is no longer a suspicious enemy. I enter into it, I wish to become familiar with it, and this happens from the inside. I know a new openness toward the body, an asceticism of consciousness, of awareness. We are told that while meditating and practicing his extreme austerities, the Buddha suddenly remembered that as a child, sitting under a tree, he had become aware of breathing, and following his breathing, he had naturally and effortlessly watched without distraction as he passed through the four states of consciousness and concentration. Remembering this natural realization, the Buddha gave up his breathing exercises, fasting, and other extreme demands on his body. His practice shifted from forceful effort and doing to recognition of a nondistracted awareness and a fearless, relaxed, more conscious meditation. The Buddha's shift seems to suggest that there is a tremendous support hidden in our bodies: an organic, instinctual support.

Can we find that support as we are, in our rough and heavy bodies, driven by attractions to pleasure and the avoidance of pain? Between indulgence and renunciation, something magical begins to happen, a new attitude and new attention toward the body appears—a searching awareness, without agenda, to see what is. The body becomes less fearful, less self-protective, and begins to reveal its mysteries, gradually becoming an ally in the search for reality and freedom. Here we are reminded of the many images of the serpent Muchalinda, representing the

reptilian brain, which controls the body's most basic drives, instinctual activities, and impulses of survival— sex, eating, breathing. Suggesting the transformation of these energies, Muchalinda rises up, spreading his hood over the meditating Buddha to protect him, now willingly and mysteriously serving the search for liberation.

In becoming aware of the body and establishing a living and immediate connection between the body and the mind, I begin to see the force of like and dislike that Buddhism insists is the fundamental slavery of sleeping men and women. Here again a strange thing happens. As I enter into my body, I not only see more clearly the force of my automatic judgments but also become more aware of my seeing and the freedom it brings. There is a kind of emptiness and fluidity in this awareness; that which is seen is transformed, revealing an energetic quality. In this light, the embodiment of a Buddha, the physical manifestation of enlightened reality in a body, is an extraordinary accomplishment. In Tibetan Buddhism the appearance of the *nirmanakaya*, the physical body of the Buddha, is sometimes referred to as the “Great Movement”—a movement of incarnation and formless reality into form.

The magic of emptiness, of changing qualities and forms of embodiment appearing and disappearing, is at the heart of the more advanced Tantric practices. Rechungpa, one of Milarepa's two main disciples, said:

The lineage I hold is the lineage of meditation instructions that benefit the mind. If these meditation instructions were taken away by the mouth of reasoning, it would be a great loss.

If we look at the body externally, it is an illusory body. It has no longevity, but in fact it is the body from which the body of the Buddha arises. Since it is the foundation from which the body of the Buddha arises, we shouldn't just see it as an or-

dinary body. We should meditate on it as the body of a deity. To see our body as the body of a deity is very important. —Thrangu Rinpoche, *Rechungpa, A Biography of Milarepa's Disciple*

Deity yoga is a meditative form that calls for visualizing oneself in the body of Buddha, in a special mode called “taking imagination as the spiritual path.” In this form, one realizes that one is imperfect, but cultivates the divine body. It is meant to be a difficult but swift path. The Dalai Lama reports how he was touched by the “flesh” of the gods:

When I was a young boy, Tantra was just a matter of blind faith. At age twenty-four, I lost my own country, and then after coming to India, I really started reading Tsongkhapa's [renowned reformer and founder of the Gelugpa school] explanations on emptiness. Then, after moving to Dharamsala, I put more effort into the study and practice of the stages of the path, emptiness, and Tantra. So it was only in my late twenties, after gaining some experience of emptiness, that deity yoga made sense. One time in the main temple in Dharamsala, I was performing the ritual of imagining myself as a deity, Highest Yoga Tantra, called Guhyasamaja. My mind continuously remained on the recitation of the ritual text, and when the words “I myself” came, I completely forgot about my usual self in relation to my combination of mind and body. Instead, I had a very clear sense of “I” in relation to the new, pure combination of mind and body of Guhyasamaja that I was imagining. Since this is the type of self-identification that is at the heart of Tantric yoga, the experience confirmed for me that with enough time, I could definitely

achieve the extraordinary, deep states mentioned in the scripture.

—*How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life*

As Buddhism has been introduced to the West, we have heard and read extraordinary things about the mind, but the body has been less emphasized. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche once said that awareness without form is like a man without legs, and the body without awareness is like a blind man. Consciousness, awareness, and form must meet—like a lame man riding on the back of a blind man, they need each other. Consciousness needs to manifest, and manifestation needs consciousness.

We often hear, from the Buddhist point of view, that we live in the dark ages. That is a paradox for us as we consider the body. Certainly, recent advances in medicine and health are extraordinary. But at the same time, our advances seem to have hidden costs. We also live in a culture that invented advertising and the consumer society. The mission of Madison Avenue is to make us feel that we *need* to have *things* for happiness, ratcheting up the desire nature, lighting fires wherever possible. But of course, we also know that the teachings state that when things get really bad, the antidote becomes clear. For some, the indulgence and consumption of our heavy bodies (and the work and conflict to feed our appetites) have become increasingly unbearable at the same time that extraordinary new and old teachings make their appearance in the West. Maybe there is still time to find our self-luminous natures that feed on joy.

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9

LIVING FROM THE  
INSIDE OUT

Through yoga practice, Anne Cushman moves  
from watching her breath to being it.

ANNE CUSHMAN

I fell in love with yoga sixteen years ago, when I was twenty-three. I was living with two massage students in an adobe cabin on the southern border of Santa Fe, out where the art galleries and million-dollar villas disintegrated into a tattered fringe of vacant lots and trailer-home parks. Our cabin smelled of mouse droppings, a comforting smell reminiscent of the gerbil cages in second-grade classrooms. There was a wood stove in the kitchen, and an abandoned chicken coop in the yard, and an enormous teepee out by the woodpile, where my roommates and I used to gather to bang on congas and rattle gourds while incanting visualizations of our futures: “If it is for my highest good,” we’d begin, “I create a reality in which . . .”

There was always a certain amount of anxiety in these prayers, as though God were a moody and unpredictable waitress, and if we forgot to mention that we wanted cream in our coffee or a lover who wasn’t secretly already married, there would be no chance to change our order.

It was my roommate Lori who took me to my first yoga class, taught

in the early morning at her massage school by one of the students, a slender man with muscles so clearly defined that the massage teacher used to strip him to his underwear and use him as an animated anatomy text. My main reason for going, frankly, was that I couldn't afford to get Rolfed. I'd been reading about Roling in one of my roommate's massage manuals: how your skeleton could be popped apart like a two-year-old's Barbie doll and put back together in better alignment. I longed to be remade like that—a fresh start, from the bones up, like having your engine rebuilt by God. But Roling was \$60 a session, way more than I could afford on my \$5-an-hour part-time job as a product tester for an interactive video company. So I decided to try yoga instead.

The carpeted room smelled of almond body oil, sweat, and steaming brown rice. The teacher stood at the front of the room in threadbare gray sweatpants, naked from the waist up. As he swung his arms overhead in a Sun Salutation, slabs of muscles slid around his chest and back; then he folded in two at the hips. I took a deep breath and dove in.

At twenty-three, I wasn't a newcomer to Eastern spiritual practices. Two years earlier I had graduated from Princeton University with a degree in comparative religion, concentrating on Buddhism and Hinduism. I had spent months in my dingy basement carrel at Firestone Library in the flickering, greenish glow of fluorescent lights, drinking metallic decaf from a vending machine and taking notes on texts that told me Buddhism couldn't be found in books. For my senior thesis, I'd gotten a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to produce a documentary about Zen in America and had spent a month at the Zen Center of Los Angeles with my filmmaker boyfriend, videotaping interviews with teachers and practitioners. I'd started an intermittent meditation practice, sat a couple of Zen sesshins, and had begun thinking of myself as a Buddhist.

But as I folded, arched, breathed, and sweated through that first yoga practice in Santa Fe, I could feel that something different was starting to happen. My body thrummed like a plucked guitar string. Energy buzzed and tingled in my spine. I could feel my breath pulse through my whole body—rippling my vertebrae, spreading my ribs, sending waves of sensation through bones and muscles and organs and skin.

Meditation, for me, had always been a cerebral experience, with “me” sitting firmly in my own head, observing my breath and body (that itchy nostril! that stabbing knee!) like a theater critic reviewing a particularly maddening play. But now, for the first time, I was feeling my own body from the inside, swimming in a swirling stream of sensations. After years of trying to watch my breath, finally I was *being* it. It reminded me of one of my recurring dreams: that a wall in my house had lifted up and revealed a whole other room—magical, mysterious—that I hadn’t even known was there.

From that moment forward, hatha yoga and Buddhist meditation have flowed together for me. On Vipassana retreats in California and New Mexico—my hips throbbing and my neck pinched from long hours of cross-legged sitting—I’d duck out of walking meditation to do Sun Salutations amid the pine trees and yuccas, and watch as pain and irritation dissolved into pleasure and peace. On retreats at Plum Village, the French community of Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, I’d get up at dawn to stand on my head on the dewy grass outside my tent, while the sun rose over fields of sunflowers. As I sat in meditation, I’d feel the tingle and pulse of the energy I’d awakened through yoga postures. And at the heart of a sweaty yoga practice, I could rest in the stillness I’d cultivated while I sat on my cushion.

These yoga breaks always felt a little illicit, like I was sneaking out of the meditation retreat to have a margarita and get laid. In those days,



most hardcore Buddhist practitioners looked down on yoga as excessively sensual and body-obsessed—after all, how could you take seriously a spiritual practice that was performed in pink Lycra tights?

The Buddha, they pointed out, had studied with the greatest yogis of India but rejected their body-based practices as too extreme and ultimately ineffective at bringing about lasting happiness. And in contemporary Western culture—at a time when yoga is associated, in the popular consciousness, with sleek, young actresses flexing in skin-tight unitards on Gucci yoga mats—it's all too easy to get attached to the glittering goals of the sculpted buttocks and pectorals, or the head arched back to the soles of the feet in a perfect King Cobra. All of these forms are impermanent, my Buddhist teachers remind me; all of them will die and rot.

But for almost twenty years, I've kept on doing yoga because I've found that for me, there's no faster way to transform my mind than to move my body. Yoga offers me direct access to a joy that arises straight from my nerves and bones, independent of external circumstances. In Western terms, this transformation can be described in terms of hormones and nerve synapses and endorphins; in Eastern terms, it's a function of *prana* and *chakras* and energies flowing through a network of subtle channels. But in either case, the experience is the same—a transformation of all the subjective sensations that give rise to my sense of self. Moving my body into different shapes, I become a different person.

Creating more space in my joints, I make more space in my mind as well. Twisting and bending and arching my body, I break up the ice floes of self-judgment that have frozen in my muscles. I squeeze out the anxiety knotted between my shoulder blades. I melt the anger in the pit of my stomach into tears.

I may come to my mat miserable, tense, constricted, burdened by

judgments of all the things that I'm not that I should be and all the things I shouldn't be that I am. The walls of my mind close in on me like a trash compactor. You chose the wrong career, jeer the voices in my head. You married the wrong person. You haven't accomplished enough, and what you have accomplished is not any good. But at the end of the practice, I'll leave the mat with every cell of my body singing, and my heart wide open. My inner hecklers hurl their taunts and tomatoes from a distant corner of my mind, their voices irrelevant, all but inaudible.

Almost ten years ago, I made a pilgrimage to India to visit the places associated with the Buddha's life. I explored the buried ruins of monasteries marking the site of the palace in Nepal where the young Siddhartha was raised as a prince in the Shakya clan. I hiked up a heat-baked hill to meditate in the tiny, smoke-blackened cave where Siddhartha had spent six years in ascetic practice, starving himself until his spine showed through the skin of his belly and his buttocks looked like horses' hooves. I walked on the banks of the river where he renounced asceticism and ate the rice pudding offered to him by a village girl.

I meditated beneath the branches and heart-shaped leaves of the Bodhi tree—a fourth-generation descendent of the actual tree that sheltered the Buddha as he attained enlightenment—and listened to the sonorous chanting of hundreds of Tibetan monks, deep and unfathomable as the mind itself. As tinny music jangled from a chair lift across the valley, I watched a magenta sunset from Vulture Peak, where the Buddha first preached the Heart Sutra, proclaiming that “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” As lemur monkeys quarreled in the sal trees overhead, I circumambulated a stupa in Kushinagar that commemorates the place where he died of food poisoning in his eighties.

My trip to India brought home for me a very simple truth: The Buddha was a human being, in a human body. Like any other person, he

was born, walked on the earth, and died. And his great awakening took place in this body—indeed, through this body—a body that, like anyone else's, got sick, got hungry, shat, pissed, fell apart.

After all, most of the experiences that I think of as most spiritual—being born, giving birth, loving another person, losing loved ones to death, dying myself—are also intensely physical, inextricably entwined with the messy, sensual business of blood and nerves and skin.

Yoga grounds my awareness, again and again, in cartilage, muscle, organs, and bone; it hooks me back into the moment-to-moment unfolding of embodied experience, which at other times I am all too willing to ignore in favor of the alluring fantasies spun by my mind. My practice reminds me that the specifics of my physical experience in this moment—this belly full of French toast, this pelvis skewed slightly to the right from carrying a baby on my hip all morning, this tangible sorrow shrink-wrapped around my heart—are the doorway into the infinite, the place where I touch the whole of creation. As I explore the wilderness of my own body, I see that I am made of blood and bones, sunlight and water, pesticide residues and redwood humus, the fears and dreams of generations of ancestors, particles of exploded stars.

Whether you call it genes or karma, my body carries with it the encoded stories of lifetime after lifetime. I've got the fair, freckled skin and racehorse nerves of my Irish ancestors, the tight jaw and stern willpower of my Puritan ones. Opening into a backbend, I touch my grandmother's raging grief—lodged deep in my own heart—for a child dead at age four. Surrendering into a forward bend, I meet the resistance of what my chiropractor calls my military neck—passed down from my father the army general and his father the army general, who stood tall and swallowed their fear.

Through yoga practice, my body becomes the meditation hall where

I can cultivate the classic contemplative arts of presence, concentration, and insight. Yoga encourages me to focus my awareness with exquisite precision—to feel into the space between two thoracic vertebrae; to sense the skin on the inner armpit; to notice the flickers of joy and sorrow alternating with every heartbeat. And then—on a good day—I can begin to see the rest of my life with that poet’s sensitivity. My practice can remind me to bow down to all the intimate, ordinary details of my life—whether I’m picking smashed raisins from the floor by my son’s high chair or clicking on Netscape to open my e-mail—with that same sort of tender appreciation, like an artist painting an apple over and over again, worshiping it with her brush.

When I started doing yoga, I actually thought there was somewhere to get to. Shuffling through old files recently, I found a yoga exam from my days in a teacher-training program at the Iyengar Yoga Institute in San Francisco, in which the teacher had asked us to pick four poses that we found difficult and describe what we were going to do to master them. Earnestly, I laid out my challenges—the tight hips in Revolved Triangle Pose, the tucked-under sitting bones in Seated Forward Bend—and outlined the steps I was taking to eradicate them. Implicit in my answer was the belief that my challenges were both finite and soluble, that with diligent practice, I would root them out and arrive at perfection. In those days, I still thought that “doing things right” was the point of yoga. In my mind, my life stretched ahead of me as an endless upward spiral. Through my practice, I imagined, I’d root out all my messy imperfections: my tight hamstrings, my rambling mind, my possessiveness and jealousy, the way my left shoulder lifted higher than my right. Like my Downward Dog pose, my whole life would come into perfect alignment. I’d learn to sing on key. I’d write a best-selling novel. I’d revel in public speaking. I’d fall in love only with people who fell in love with me.

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Nowadays, my practice is different. My body has not gotten better and better, like an upgraded software program. Instead, despite my best efforts, it's wearing out, breaking down, growing softer and looser and weaker. In the last ten years, I've lugged a backpack all over India. I've twisted a knee jogging and pulled a muscle doing splits and thrown my back out moving boxes. I've cut back on yoga practice to write a book. I've carried two babies to term. These days, I can't do the backbends I used to do effortlessly. Kicking up into an Elbow Balance the other day, I toppled over with a graceless thud. One day in yoga class, after being up and down all night with my teething one-year-old, I actually fell asleep in a shoulder stand.

These days, my practice is teaching me to embrace imperfection: to have compassion for all the ways things haven't turned out as I'd planned, in my body and in my life; for the way things keep falling apart, and failing, and breaking down. It's less about fixing things and more about learning to be present for exactly what is.

My yoga practice has helped me be present through the terrible loss of delivering my stillborn daughter, Sierra, and the almost unbearable joy of receiving my newborn son, Skye, in my arms, wet and wide-eyed and lifting his wobbly head to turn toward his daddy's voice. It's taught me to begin to embrace my body and my life with all their ragged edges and cellulite; to open to a neck that goes out and a partner who lets me down and muscles that won't release and a child who won't sleep through the night. It reminds me how futile are all my attempts to control my body and my life, and that when it comes right down to it, I can't control or hang onto anything that's really important. But it also reminds me that despite all this—or perhaps because of this—my life is precious and glorious. It's teaching me to find some sort of balance and ease in the uncertainty, like I'm doing a handstand poised at the edge of a cliff.

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When I do yoga these days, I feel like one of those yogis I used to see in India doing a headstand in the center of a circle of fire, or sitting in lotus by a funeral pyre on the banks of the Ganges, watching a corpse burn. I know the world is in flames all around me; I know my body is on its way back to the earth. But in the middle of it all, I can breathe and stretch and flow and dance; I can reach my arms to the sky, and bow my head to the earth, and feel my body ringing like a temple bell.

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10

AT HOME IN OUR BODIES

AN INTERVIEW WITH JON KABAT-ZINN

Can Buddhist practice liberate us from the prison of physical pain? How can meditation help when medicine falls short? Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., professor emeritus of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, speaks to these questions as a longtime practitioner of Buddhist meditation and hatha yoga, and as a pioneer in the use of mindfulness to treat chronic pain and illness. More than 13,000 people have visited the world-renowned Stress Reduction Clinic that Kabat-Zinn established in 1979 at the UMass Medical Center, and the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program—described in Kabat-Zinn’s bestseller *Full Catastrophe Living*—is now also offered at some two hundred other medical facilities worldwide. *Tricycle* editor-at-large Joan Duncan Oliver spoke with Kabat-Zinn.

**Let’s start with a basic question: What is pain?** Physical pain is the response of the body and the nervous system to a huge range of stimuli that are perceived as noxious, damaging, or dangerous. There are really three dimensions to pain: the physical, or sensory component; the emotional, or affective component: how we feel about the sensation; and the cognitive component: the meaning we attribute to our pain.

Let's say you've got a pain in your back. You can't lift your children; getting in and out of the car is difficult; you can't sit in meditation. Maybe you can't even work. That's the physical component. But you're having to give up a lot, and you're going to have feelings about that—anger, probably—and you're susceptible to depression. That's the emotional response. And then you have thoughts about the pain—questions about what caused it, negative stories about what's going to happen. Those expectations, projections, and fears compound the stress of the pain, eroding the quality of your life.

There is a way to work with all this, based on Buddhist meditative practices, that can liberate you, to a very large extent, from the experience of pain. Whether or not you can reduce the level of sensory pain, the affective and cognitive contributions to the pain—which make it much worse—usually can be lessened. And then, very often, the sensory component of the pain changes as well.

**You mean that once you've changed your relationship to the pain, the physical discomfort may decrease?** That's the key point: You change your relationship to the pain by opening up to it and paying attention to it. You “put out the welcome mat.” Not because you're masochistic, but because the pain is there. So you need to understand the nature of the experience and the possibilities for, as the doctors might put it, “learning to live with it,” or, as the Buddhists might put it, “liberation from the suffering.” If you distinguish between pain and suffering, change is possible. As the saying goes, “Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.”

There have been studies looking at how the mind processes acute pain at the sensory level. Subjects are randomized between two groups, then given the cold pressor test, where a tourniquet is placed around your bicep, then you stick your arm into ice water. There's no more blood



flow, so your arm gets very painful very fast. They measure how long you can keep your arm in the water as a function of whether you are given an *attentional strategy*, such as paying attention to the sensations and really moving into them and being with them as nonjudgmentally as you can—a mindfulness strategy, in other words—or a *distraction strategy*, where you just try to think about other things and tune out the pain. What they found was that in the early minutes of having your arm in the ice water, distraction works better than mindfulness: You're less aware of the discomfort because you're telling yourself a story, or remembering something, or having a fantasy. But after the arm is in the cold water for a while, mindfulness becomes much more powerful than distraction for tolerating the pain. With distraction alone, once it breaks down and doesn't work, you've got nothing.

**The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program uses the body scan as well as sitting meditation to manage pain. Can you explain how the body scan works?** The body scan is a variation on a traditional Burmese practice called sweeping, from the school of U Ba Khin, that S. N. Goenka teaches in his ten-day Vipassana retreats. The traditional method involves tuning in to sensation in a narrow horizontal band that is slowly brought down through the entire body, as if you were giving yourself a CAT scan. This is analogous to the way certain metals, such as zinc, are purified in a circular zone furnace. I thought it would be hard for people in chronic pain to sit for forty-five minutes, so I modified the practice. It is done lying down, starting at the toes and moving up through different regions of the body.

This practice is a way of getting out of the head and developing intimacy with the body. The challenge is, can you feel the toes of your left foot without wiggling them) You tune in to the toes, then gradually

move your attention to the bottom of the foot and the heel, and feel the contact with the floor. Then you move to the ankle and slowly up the leg to the pelvis. Then you go to the toes of the right foot and move up the right leg. Very slowly you move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, then the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Then you go to the fingers on both hands and move up the arms to the shoulders. Then you move through the neck and throat, the face and the back of the head, and then right on up through the top of the head.

And all the while, you're in contact with the breath. I tend to have people feel the breath moving in and out of the body region they're attending to, so that there's a sort of dual awareness. As you move up the body, you're learning how to focus on a particular region, then let go of it and move on. It's like cultivating concentration and mindfulness simultaneously, because there is a continual flow. You're not staying with one object of attention.

**Does the body scan work like a relaxation practice?** The body scan is a meditation practice, not a relaxation exercise. Relaxation is done with a goal in mind. Meditation is about nonstriving and emptiness. If you get into thinking, "I'm doing this meditation to take away my pain," you're coming at it with the wrong motivation. Meditation doesn't "work" or not "work"; it's about being with things as they are.

**What if your pain is so bad that it's hard for you to concentrate on anything else?** You have a number of choices. Let's say you have lower back pain. You can say, "I'm going to try to focus on my toes, even in the presence of back pain. The back's always there; I'll get to it sooner or later. Why don't I see if I can really learn to focus my attention where it's being asked to focus?" Often, when you do that, the felt sense of the pain

in the back lessens.

But if the pain is too great, you can go to the region where the pain is and let the breath merge with it. Breathe in and feel the breath, or in your mind's eye see the breath moving down into the lower back. Then on the out-breath, as the breath lets go, see if you can allow the mind to let go. You're not trying to shut off the sensations from the lower back—just to experience the fullness of whatever happens as you let go. Then in the next moment, the sensations and the feelings and the thoughts might all come flooding back, and you've got the next in-breath to work with. So it's a practice.

You develop an observer's attitude toward the pain? Basically, you're intentionally bearing witness to the pain rather than distancing yourself from it; we're not teaching mindfulness as a dualistic practice. Nevertheless, there's a sense that there's the pain, and there's the observing of the pain. It's important to understand that as an intermediate step toward ultimate liberation. It means that I can rest in awareness, then ask myself, "Is the awareness in pain in this moment?" And the answer invariably is, "As I look at it right now, the awareness of the pain is not in pain." When you realize you can rest in this awareness, the pain may be just as intense, but you're now cultivating equanimity and clear comprehension. You're seeing the pain as it is, as sensation. There is a knowing that it is not pleasant. But the interpretation that the pain is killing me, or ruining my life, and all the emotions and stories that go with that, are seen for what they are. In that seeing, they often go into abeyance.

**What do you tell people who say, "My practice isn't working: I'm still in pain"?** When you think that your practice should be working, then you've already fallen out of your practice and into expectations that the practice is going to achieve some kind of prefigured, desirable result.

This need to get rid of is its own form of ignorance, and we need to look at our “I” statements. A worthy object of attention and inquiry is: Who is suffering? Who is in pain? We can ask that, but rather than coming up with an answer *qua* thought, we can drop into not-knowing and experience simply being aware.

Not that “simply being aware” is easy. When pain arises, the same challenge occurs as when the breath arises. That’s one reason to practice when we’re not in a lot of pain—to cultivate strong practice so we can rely on it when it becomes extremely difficult to practice.

**You seem to be saying that pain is just like the rest of life, only more so.** If you pay attention to the little episodes of pain in your life, you can learn how to work with the bigger episodes because you learn about *anicca*, impermanence; *anatta*, no-self; and *dukkha*, suffering. The meditation orientation is not about fixing pain or making it better. It’s about looking deeply into the nature of pain—making use of it in certain ways that might allow us to grow. In that growing, things will change, and we have the potential to make choices that will move us toward greater wisdom and compassion, including self-compassion, and thus toward freedom from suffering.

**Some forms of pain are harder to deal with than others, aren’t they? Lower back pain, for example.** Lower back pain tends to be more complex because every time you stand up or move in any way, you may be exacerbating the inflammation or instability. But over time, you can actually dramatically transform your relationship to your back. What we’re talking about is the deep structure of rehabilitation.

The deep meaning of “rehabilitation,” which is related to the word “habitation,” is “learning to live inside again.” And the deeper Indo-Eu-

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ropean root is ghabh-e, which means “giving and receiving,” like tonglen, the Tibetan Buddhist practice. So rehabilitation is an exchange, in which you’re willing to move into the interiority of your being and work at the boundary with what is, with full awareness and compassion. If you work that edge patiently, with perseverance, motivation, and kindness, if you give yourself over to it with mindfulness, there is the very real possibility of returning home to your body and learning to live inside again.

In my view, we all need to learn to live inside again. We don’t have to have pain to wake up to the fact that we might be happier if we inhabited the totality of our lives.