



By Aura Glaser

Years ago I came across this quote by Saraha, one of the great forerunners of Buddhist Tantra: “All the sacred places in the world are in my body, and the most profound pilgrimage I can ever make is in my own body.” This understanding that our body is a place of pilgrimage and discovery, that our body might actually be a wise and trustworthy teacher on our spiritual journey, resonated deeply. It sparked a personal process of exploration into the relationship between embodiment and awakening. The Tantric vision of life is a revolutionary and radically positive life-embracing vision — the whole of reality is an expression of the Divine. The world is not divided into “higher” and “lower,” “pure” and “impure,” “spirit” and “matter”; the world is one piece, undivided, and sacred in its entirety. Everything we need in order to be whole and awake is within us at this very moment.

“The deeper we enter life, the more spiritual we become.”

Too often we engage in spiritual practice as a way to free ourselves from the messiness of ordinary human experience. We imagine that spiritual awakening is something separate from and other than life itself, when, in fact, the deeper we enter life, the more spiritual we become. The root and essence of our nature is spiritual — to become a full human being is also to spiritually awaken. When we hear about “meditation,” “mindfulness,” and “mind-training,” we may assume this means working with our minds alone. This assumption may also inform our understanding of enlightenment, of spiritual awakening. Nothing could be further from the way it really is.

If meditation, mindfulness, and mind-training are to be effective and transformative, they must be whole-being endeavors. They need to include our whole body and all of its levels. When we open to the body, we begin to directly experience that this physical, solid body of bones, organs, and flesh is actually an overlay. We see that the apparently solid body is a continuous flow of sensations. At a deeper level, we enter the body and experience a flow of pure energy. And at an even more subtle level, we experience the body as space.

We can begin to work with the body in this most simple way — sit upright and feel your inner alignment; pay attention and notice where you are tight and then gently relax; breathe into your body and notice sensations and feelings; inhabit any part of your body and find a place of ease. Descending into the sense field naturally opens your awareness further. At first it may feel like we are putting our awareness into the body. Over time we realize that we are attuning to the awareness that is already there. The more we bring our attention to the body, the more we come to know that this very body that we were born with is at the heart of the mystery of human life — it is at the heart of spiritual life.

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We live in a body-obsessed culture but our fixation is with the surface. We’re consumed with the appearance of things. How we look, how thin, how fat, how youthful, how old, how fit. Our bodies do our bidding, but we don’t actually inhabit them. Living on the surface keeps us feeling chronically cut off, fragmented, dislocated, disconnected. It keeps us from ourselves.

My awareness of our collective disembodiment goes back thirty years to my experience of returning to the United States after travelling overland through central

Asia (with dear friend and intrepid travel companion, Sandy Finkel), and after living for two years on the Indian subcontinent. Landing in New York City jolted me with the culture shock of the tall skyscraping buildings, fruit and vegetables that looked unnaturally large, the intense buzz of modern-life busyness, and a general sense of everything feeling speedy and threaded with agitation. I recall walking down Fifth Avenue, in my best Indian clothing and flip-flops, seeing the beautifully coiffed and fashionably dressed. I sensed a palpable undercurrent of unhappiness, a flatness, sadness, and stress that was so visceral it stunned me.

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I had been living in a place teeming with poverty — beggars lining the streets and railway stations, lepers sitting on doorsteps, cows and water buffalos wandering about, open sewers flowing by the roadsides, and families living in cardboard box homes on traffic islands. And yet, amidst all the rawness was a seamlessness to life, a feeling-presence and vitality that was notably absent on the streets of New York. Beyond the clear and immediate realization that wealth, comfort, and modern conveniences don’t generate happiness, I came to a more gradual awareness that I was witnessing the painful consequence of our collective disembodiment. Living so much in our heads and in our thoughts about things cuts us off from the substance and fullness of life. It has been a personal journey to understand the impact that this disembodiment has on our sense of connectedness and well-being, and the way it impedes a process of spiritual awakening.

In traditional cultures people didn’t lose connection to their body sense. They stayed connected. And from that base of connection, they could open into deeper and subtler levels of consciousness and embodiment. As modern people we face a unique challenge — we are attempting to awaken while in a disembodied state. This simply won’t work. Yet we are so conditioned to the flow of this habit that even those of us who intuitively grasp the dilemma can still find ourselves caught in its current.

The modern world privileges the conceptual mind to such a degree that for many it is the only valid and reliable source of knowledge. Other ways of knowing, such as intuition, sensation, feelings, or dreams, are considered inferior. But when we talk about awakening and embodiment from the point of view of the world’s wisdom traditions, this view is reversed. The conceptual mind, while important and necessary, is considered an indirect source of knowing. From a wisdom-mind perspective, concepts are not the way things are; they are abstractions pointing to our direct experience. Reality itself can never be fully known or communicated through words and concepts. It is through non-conceptual awareness alone that we are able to directly experience the mind’s openness. As it says in the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching*, “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The unnamable is the eternally real.”

Our conceptual mind is like the menu at a restaurant and the direct experience is like the meal. There’s a big difference between reading the menu — no matter how mouthwatering — and actually eating the meal. Our hunger will never be satisfied by reading a pile of menus!

A wonderful story in the Zen tradition illustrates this distinction between direct and indirect knowing. A dedicated young practitioner arrives for an audience with his teacher. His teacher looks at him and asks, “Tell me, what is the basic human problem?” The student thinks for a moment and says, “The basic human problem is that we’re not awake.” The teacher responds, “Well, yes, but that is just a thought.” So the student goes away, feeling a bit perplexed.

A month later he returns for his next audience, when the teacher asks, “Tell me, what is the basic human problem?” The student, feeling more confident, replies, “The basic human problem is that we think too much. We believe our thoughts. We take our thoughts to be reality.” Again the teacher says, “You are still just thinking,” and dismisses him with the ring of a bell. Now the student is completely confused. So he does what many of us do in these situations. He reads everything he can. He reads from East to West, North to South. He really, really, wants to have the right answer.

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The next month he meets his teacher, feeling completely prepared when asked, “What is the basic human problem?” Without hesitation, he answers, “There is no problem.” The teacher looks at him intensely and says, “Then what are you doing here?!” The student crumbles in his seat. Upon seeing this, the teacher softly asks, “What is happening right now?” The student answers, “I feel like a miserable failure and a fool. I just want to crawl into a hole and disappear.” To this his teacher replies, “Enter directly into this experience, and you will understand the basic human problem.”

What happens when we do what the teacher is suggesting? What happens when we drop the storyline, the conceptual narrative, and enter directly into the underlying energy of experience? What happens when we stop trying to figure it out, explain it to ourselves, or find someone to blame, and just feel it? However painful the emotion, be it grief or rage, loneliness or shame, the underlying energy is one shared by all humans since the beginning of time. Touching it directly, staying with it, opens our awareness and our heart. It opens our world. And in order to access this direct contact, we need to enter into the body.

Our bodies carry deep history. We have habitually walled off experience in order to dull the impact of pain, or to fit in, or to receive approval or love. We discover in the process of working with the body that the constrictions on our awareness are not only conceptual, they are deeply cellular. Every time we prevent ourselves from feeling something our body contracts in response. For example, we can't keep ourselves from crying without tightening our throat and lungs. If we have a long history of holding back tears, or a particularly traumatic event related to this experience, our body will be frozen in these patterns of holding. As we gently release the bindings of painful memories and emotions, energy moves more freely and a vaster awareness emerges.

The Buddha's early teachings were deeply somatic, grounded in sensations, feelings, emotions — the stuff of life. The first of the four foundations of mindfulness is the "Mindfulness of the Body." And the later Tantric teachings considered the body the locus of enlightenment, holding and revealing interpenetrating layers of reality. In Tibetan Buddhism, awakening itself is described as the fulfillment of the three bodies of a Buddha, with each of these bodies corresponding to the full expression of a subtler dimension of awareness.

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Our body is an instrument of direct contact, of openness to experience. As soon as we make contact with our sense field and move out of the conceptual field, our awareness widens. Making deep inward contact with ourselves and not exiting into our opinions and judgments is also central to love of our own humanity, and by natural extension, to the love of others.

Even beginning to open into the body brings a deeper sense of well-being, of relaxation. And that deeper sense of well-being and relaxation allows us to engage the conditions of our lives with much greater clarity and compassion. It deepens our sense of inner knowing. It's through this inner contact that we come to know what is true. We find the strength to live our values, to live our truth in the world. Being embodied is being undivided. We are at one with ourselves, with our emotions, with our experiences, with our entire life situation, with *all* of our conditions. The conceptual mind is always separated, always at a little bit of a distance. Inward contact helps heal the fragmentation between our thinking and our feeling, between body and mind, between ourselves and our world.

As human beings we yearn for a direct experience of who and what we are. Most of us long from the depths of our being to drink the fresh, ever-flowing water of our true nature. We want to know and experience directly the immeasurable reality of our existence. As we touch into the earth of our body and gradually inhabit ourselves more deeply, we uncover our authentic Self and how we are one with this life — how our being is not separate from the being of the world. We come to know the free, unbound dimension of our nature and the fully human, emotional and relational being as one seamless totality. An embodied approach to spiritual awakening unfolds the uniqueness of our person and our oneness with all of life at the same time.

Rest Inside Yourself: A Brief Embodiment Meditation (This meditation weaves in elements of Realization Process®, a method developed by Judith Blackstone to support embodied nondual awakening. I trained with Judith and am certified to teach Realization Process® Meditation and Subtle Self Work.)

Sit upright and close your eyes. Bring your attention to your breath. Instead of following the movement of your thoughts, follow the movement of your breath. Begin to make inner contact with your body and body sensations through your breathing...

Bring the breath in through both nostrils gradually expanding your inner presence. Feel your presence in your chest, your abdomen, your pelvis, your back. Feel your inner presence in the deep core of your body just in front of your spine... Expand into your legs, your feet, including your toes... Feel your presence expand into your shoulders, arms and hands, out to your fingertips... Expand your feeling presence into your neck and head... Now feel your presence inside your whole body, all at once, from the top of your head to the tips of your toes... With your eyes still closed find the space outside your body, the space in the room. Feel that the space inside your body and outside your body is the same continuous space; it pervades you. You are still inside your body but your body is pervaded by space. You are that space...

Now find a place within your body where you feel at rest or at ease. It could be in your hands, in your heart, in your feet, anywhere in your body. It could be in your whole body. Wherever you feel a sense of ease, an absence of tension, let yourself rest there. Find a place of welcome in your body, a sense of home... Slowly open your eyes, while staying in contact with your body, with the feeling of ease and inner presence.

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Aura Glaser, Ph.D., is a dharma teacher and clinical psychologist integrating spiritual, psychological, and embodiment work. She began practicing Buddhism in India in the late 1970s and for over thirty years has studied Tibetan Buddhism, Vipassana, and inner yoga with the great masters of Asia. She is the author of A Call to Compassion, a co-founder of Jewel Heart, and a therapist in private practice. Aura founded Inner Sky (www.innersky.net) in January 2012. (She was also the original owner of Crazy Wisdom Bookstore, from 1982 to 1989, when it was located on N. Fourth Avenue.) Her email contact is aura@innersky.net.

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