

In the Body of Awakening | Part Two

Touching Enlightenment (continued)

Drawing on Tibetan Yogic practices, a commentary on the modern crisis of disembodiment.

- Reggie Ray

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 nonjudgmental 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.