

EXPLORING THE BODY

*'What you cannot find in your body,
you will never find elsewhere.'*

Sufi saying

The Nature and Significance of the Body

The physical body has its own natural organic intelligence and speaks its own language. The experience of the sensation of the body is a constant reminder of our embodied existence in the present moment here and now. It is the abode of life energy which animates the bodily existence and defines us as human beings. This life energy is sometimes called *pneuma*, *elan vital*, the "Divine Elixir" or, in Eastern terms, *prana* or *Ch'i*.

The instinctive wisdom of the body is often taken for granted in modern times, but it can be rediscovered through ancient biological memories ingrained in our physical being. This so-called "animal nature" is in harmony with the natural rhythms of the universe. With respect to animals, human beings have many similar traits and behaviours. These include the major bodily functions such as the five senses, sensitivity to pain, sleeping, eating, drinking, defecating and urinating, the drive to find a mate, and the cycle of birth and death. In both the animal and the human realms, the body is a truly marvellous "working machine," as Keith Buzzell details in *A New Conception of God*:

We gradually become aware of more and more of the truly miraculous capacities that are taking place at every moment within the body, realizing that in this direct confrontation with physical reality, that I do not digest the food, I do not circulate the blood, I do not breathe, I do not heal the illness or injury, I do not wake up in the morning or go to sleep at night, I do not do anything – but 'something' in me can become more aware of these variegated processes and, from this progressively more refined *recognition*, a powerful feeling arises at times – a feeling of awe, of immense gratitude, at times even of love, for the miraculous body which I truly inhabit . . . I see that, beneath all the automaticity, there exists an extraordinary intelligence – an intelligence that so surpasses my own that I am humbled to my core. The body, with its vast intelligence and capacities, is 'given' to me. It is a gift – from Above – and, paradoxically, it is intended to be a good *servant* – if the *master* within can assume its rightful place in me. (1)

The body's innate awareness and intelligence is crucial to the balanced and harmonious development of our being. Three centers or functions – the instinctive-moving, emotional and intellectual – are located in the midsection, the chest, and the head. They are the transmitters and receivers of all the energies which define our experience of ourselves and the world. The

spinal column unites all three via the central nervous system. Although they are designed to work together in harmony, they typically operate as independent systems within us.

The demarcation of the body into many separate parts (organs, limbs, cells and so forth) is a conceptual distinction. In actual fact the body is an integrated whole, just as the ocean and its constantly changing waves are one inseparable whole. This holistic body is a crucible of dynamic activity: “The body is giving rise to countless experiences and is doing so quite naturally and effortlessly. Hearing, seeing, sensing – see how the body is generating these, seemingly without our consent. Much as a rose naturally gives off its beautiful color and sweet perfume, the body is producing its own unique fragrances in the form of the myriad experiences and perceptions that arise every moment.” (2)

Notice awareness – the activity of *basic knowing* that is present and arising here, spontaneously. Through the remarkable activity of the body and brain and the billions of cells and probably trillions of molecules, atoms, electrons and sub-atomic particles that constitute the life of each cell, sentience is somehow miraculously arising. The body is awake and conscious, effortlessly. Just as the rose cannot help but give off its sweet smell, so too is the body producing the aroma of consciousness, for it is its nature to do so. Now feel this configuration of life we call “the body” and see if you can find anything dividing the body from the totality of life. Sense how the body is but an extension of the boundlessness of existence itself. Ask: “Is it the body that is awake or is it the universe that is conscious?” For isn’t the body inseparable from the universe, with no lines of division anywhere to be found. (3)

The body can be seen as a microcosm of the universe (macrocosm) as many spiritual teachings aver. This reflects the metaphysical principle ‘As above, so below’ which unites the greater with the lesser on the many different levels of the cosmos. In his seminal work *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness*, Tibetan Buddhist scholar Lama Govinda provides a basic framework for this important conception:

To those who recognize the body as a creation and the visible expression of the very forces that constitute our innermost being, it becomes the temple of the mind. A temple, however, by its very structure reflects the qualities and functions of its indwelling spirit. A temple that houses a universal spirit must itself represent the universe. The functions of our body correspond to the functions and laws of the universe which gradually unfold and strive to become conscious within us. The more we realize this process, the greater will be the harmony and cooperation between body and mind, the inner and the outer world, until we finally realize their essential oneness. In that moment we know that the universe itself is our true body and that we are not confined to our present physical frame in which our universal body expresses itself on the temporal, three-dimensional plane. (4)

The body requires certain elements from the environment to maintain its physical health and well-being. This “nourishment” is not limited to food and liquids; it also includes the air that we breathe and the impressions we receive and assimilate from the environment. Each of the elements – earth, water, air and fire – are expressions of energies of different densities and qualities, and they each uniquely affect the physiological and psychological systems of the body and mind. The food we eat, the air we breathe, the sensory impressions we receive, and our interactions with other people, can be healthy or unhealthy, life affirming or life distressing. An angry confrontation with someone can be as injurious to the body as eating spoiled food or breathing in noxious air.

Our eating habits need to be observed and studied to determine their effects on the body: “There is food which helps maintain the organism and there is so-called food to seduce the taste. Take note how it acts in you, how you feel before and after a meal, how the body goes to sleep and wakes up. The body itself will bring you to an intelligent choice.” (5)

In terms of diet, natural, unprocessed food such as whole grains and raw “living” food is recommended. The combination of foods that we eat is also important and we should avoid the artificial products of the modern food industry. Yoga teacher Billy Doyle: “Right eating brings a sense of lightness and alertness. If we feel heavy and dull when we wake up in the morning, we need to look closely at what we are eating, what we’re watching and reading, how we spend our time. Everything in our environment affects us in some way.” (6)

Through our body we can experience each of the four elements. All four elements are present in the body, but one typically predominates over the others at a given time.

- The earth element is experienced as solidity and heaviness; it provides the structural integrity of the body through the skeleton and muscles.
- The water element is cohesive and flowing, governing the blood, lymph and cellular fluids of the body.
- The air element is felt as internal movement and flow, and can be perceived through the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.
- The fire element is energy and vibration, experienced as heat or cold.

In *The Book of Listening*, Western Advaita (nonduality) teacher Jean Klein describes the relationship between the elements and nutrition:

Our body/mind is composed of the four elements, so that the air we breathe and how we breathe it, the water we drink and how we drink it, the food we absorb and how we absorb it, and so on, all maintain our body. We must become aware of how all the elements act on us. The assimilation of food should bring us to lightness rather than to heaviness. Very often what is called food is not food at all. Real food has not gone through any transformation. It is eaten as it comes from the ground. Any product which has been chemically altered is not food. This includes sugar, coffee, tea, meat, alcohol

and other invented foodstuffs. The incorrect combination of foods requires a tremendous supplement of energy to be digested. This energy is taken away from other sources of energy in our body. We may feel mentally or physically lethargic or over-excited, depressed or nervous. We may laugh, talk or act impulsively. There may be physical discomfort. One cannot feel or be aware of the subtler energies involved in spiritual inquiry when the body is polluted by wrong absorption. When we live with right eating, we become sattvic, light, receptive – in complete availability. A serious truth-seeker must be open at all times and on all levels. (7)

The human body is also sensitive to geographic location and altitude, and the dynamics of weather and climate patterns. The ambient temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, barometric pressure, precipitation, hours of sunlight, and the passage of warm and cold fronts have both physiological and psychological effects that vary from individual to individual. Our bodies are also attuned to cosmic rhythms such as the diurnal, solar, lunar and planetary cycles – the so-called “music of the spheres.”

Many people are estranged from their bodies. James Joyce famously captured this reality with one of the characters in his novel *Dubliners*: “Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.” Often our bodies are tense and contracted to protect ourselves from unpleasant emotional fears and experiences, a phenomenon termed “body armoring” by Wilhelm Reich. Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield: “We must work to develop a feeling awareness of what is actually going on in the body. We can direct our attention to notice the patterns of our breathing, our posture, the way we hold our back, our chest, our belly, our pelvis. In all these areas we can carefully sense the free movement of energy or the contractions and holding that prevents it.” (8)

We are obliged to live with our body, and it must be included in our spiritual journey. But many religious traditions, both Eastern and Western, have ignored this reality, casting the body as a hindrance in spiritual matters, and often denigrating or fearing the physical self with all its urges, impulses and expressions.

The body has an innate wisdom of its own and we are far from understanding all its forms of intelligence and possibilities. Unfortunately, science often tends to view the body and instinct as lower forms of intelligence, compared to the so-called higher functions of thinking and feeling. Modern civilization and most forms of education over-emphasize the intellect at the expense of the body. “We live for the future, and the future is an abstraction which exists only for the brain. The past is also only a memory. The “primary consciousness,” the basic or instinctive mind which knows reality rather than ideas about it, does not know the past or future. It lives completely in the present, and perceives nothing more than what *is* at this moment. (9) Alan Watts offers a critique of this unbalanced condition in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*:

We have been taught to neglect, despise, and violate our bodies, and to put all faith in our brains. Indeed, the special disease of civilized man might be

described as a block or schism between his brain (specifically the cortex) and the rest of his body. This corresponds to the split between man and nature. We have allowed brain thinking to develop and dominate our lives out of all proportion to “instinctual wisdom,” which we are allowing to slump into atrophy. As a consequence, we are at war within ourselves – the brain desiring things which the body does not want, and the body desiring things which the brain does not allow; the brain giving directions which the body will not follow, and the body giving impulses which the brain cannot understand. (10)

Traditionally, in many cultures of the East, exercises such as yoga *asanas* or postures were employed to maintain the health of the body as a foundation for further spiritual work such as concentration or meditation. Certain *asanas* are archetypes. When properly executed, all opposition or resistance of the body is dissolved. There is a harmonization of energies and the body is integrated with universal energy.

However, in the current culture of the West, the primary emphasis is on the health and appearance of the body rather than the higher levels of spiritual development. For instance, Westernized hatha Yoga is often a process of will power to attain certain goals and outcomes. This contradicts the original purpose of Yoga where the emphasis is on the spiritual aspect of the practice. Jean Klein highlights the distinction between the two approaches: “Although we use traditional postures and breathing techniques (*asanas* and *pranayama*), codified by Patanjali, the work begins with the conviction that there is nothing to achieve or become. It is only a way to be acquainted with what we take for granted as body, senses and mind. It brings us to know first what we are not, and eventually what we fundamentally are becomes clear. Then body, senses and mind are an expression of our wholeness.” (11)

Body-based approaches to spiritual development must also be careful to avoid identification with the body, which may only strengthen the ego. Frances Lucille, a student of Jean Klein, emphasizes this important point: “One should avoid any method based on the assumption that it is possible for the ego to become a better ego; that through body-transformation, through exercises, one could get closer to the truth. Every attempt that originates from a personal entity, through effort, is bound to fail.” (12)

The Body and the Breath

The need to breathe is the most basic survival instinct for virtually every life form on earth. But breathing is not just a physiological function – it is intimately connected to our thoughts and our emotions. The process of breathing is unique among the physiological functions of the body because of its involuntary and voluntary nature. For instance, the rate and depth of breathing can be voluntarily controlled, although involuntary reflex action limits the degree to which this can occur. Breathing affects multiple systems in the body: “Whether making manifest the potential energy locked in nutrient food, or influencing the fundamental state of

the cardiovascular system, or altering autonomic nervous system functioning and emotional states, the breath plays a crucial role in maintaining the integrity of the human organism. Breathing is a fundamental human activity which touches human functioning on numerous levels.” (13)

Breathing influences both the body and the mind, as the rate and rhythm of inspiration and expiration reflects not only our physical condition but is also a barometer of our emotional and mental states. It is a predictable indicator of the total health of the human organism, both physiological and psychological. But scientists have often downplayed the vital function of breathing in all aspects of human life:

Modern science has come to understand many of the principles involved in the physical aspect of breathing, from the muscles and organs which transport oxygen into and throughout the body down to the molecular reactions of metabolism. However, the purely intellectual appeal of these complex physiological systems has limited the scientific community’s concept of the breath to the physical level only, even though the most casual reflection indicates that the significance of breath extends beyond its purely metabolic functions. For example, one’s own personal experience suggests that there is a relationship between emotions and the breath, for most emotional states, especially if they are intense, appear to be associated with changes in breathing. The sob of grief and the trembling breath of anger are common examples which reflect the interconnection. In addition, physical stimuli such as pain and exercise can act to change both the breath and the emotional state. (14)

Breathing does not require conscious effort, as the innate intelligence of the body automatically governs the process of breathing. Although this fulfills the energy requirements of the body, it does not exhaust the possibilities inherent in the respiratory function. To facilitate a deep relaxation of the body-mind, the rhythm of breathing can be consciously slowed or it may follow a prescribed pattern (such as inhaling for 4 seconds and exhaling for 8 seconds).

Since breathing is an ever-present physiological function, it can easily be an object of attention. It can be a focus at any time or place. The rhythm of breathing can be sensed through the nostrils or the rise and fall of the abdomen. This is one of the major practices of Buddhist meditation. In *The Sound of Silence*, Theravada Buddhist teacher Ajahn Sumedho provides simple meditation instructions: “When you know your mind is wandering, that you’re thinking about something, gently go back to the point in your body where you experience the breathing, and practice just sustaining your attention on this rhythm of your breathing. Notice the difference between an inhalation and an exhalation . . . Meditation is just returning, a kind of letting go of the world, instead of trying to get something – just letting go, and then just being. Learning to be at peace and at ease with the breathing, with what’s happening now, with the body and breath. (15)

Being aware of one's breathing, of the depth and pattern of inhalation and exhalation, is a simple but highly effective method of bodily relaxation:

Be aware of the coming and going of your breath. Neither control nor direct it; simply listen to it, be aware of it. Go knowingly into the process of breathing, go knowingly into the exhalation, which is a natural giving up of all effort. Let the exhalation die in silence, and let the inner need of the body to inhale come up. In the breathing the whole psychosomatic body comes to a very deep relaxation, and there comes a moment when there is a spontaneous giving up of the voluntary process of breathing, and we remain as objectless awareness. What is important is that we have a glimpse of the objectless presence so that we can later recognize it. It happens very often before the body wakes up in the morning or in the interval between two thoughts or between two perceptions. And it is also in the state of admiration and wonderment or astonishment. (16)

In the Yoga tradition, breath control or *pranayama* usually follows the practice of *asanas* or physical postures, and precedes more advanced techniques of concentration and meditation. These ancient exercises are intended to purify both mind and body, and are said to be the key to relaxing the body, controlling the wandering mind, and attaining higher states of consciousness. A detailed instruction from the Kashmir Yoga tradition for working with the breath as a means of relaxing the body-mind is provided in Jean Klein's *Open to the Unknown* (pp. 109-112).

Both our body and mind are heavily conditioned and need to be explored through careful attention and awareness. On one level breathing exercises can direct and orchestrate the energies in the body. But in a deeper spiritual sense, it is the interval or silence between inhalation and exhalation that is emphasized. When body-mind is purified and transformed it is possible to reach higher, more subtle levels of reality. Jean Klein: "A subtle, sattvic, sensitive body is much more open to the insight, to all the subtle solicitations of being, of grace. When the impulse is strong it overcomes all obstacles. Nothing can refuse the instantaneous apperception of being." (17) Lama Govinda emphasizes the importance of the breath in the realization of a higher perspective into the nature of reality:

The most obvious and the most vital function of our psychosomatic organism is the function of breathing. Breathing is the most subtle function of our organism – the only vital function which can be raised into a conscious function, accessible to the mind. Due to this nature, breathing can be made the mediator between mind and body, or the means of our conscious participation in the most vital and universal functions of our psychosomatic organism. Breathing is the connecting link between conscious and unconscious, gross-material and fine-material, volitional and automatic functions, and therefore the most perfect expression of the nature of all life. (18)

The rhythm of inhalation and exhalation is a pointer to our fundamental nature. The pattern of breathing is a superimposition on the background of stillness or awareness. It is a vehicle of spiritual awakening, mediating between body and mind, and transforming the body from a relatively passive and unconsciously functioning entity to an instrument of spiritual illumination. The higher purpose of breathing exercises is the synthesis of body, emotions and mind, and the resulting experience of the self as a whole – a microcosm reflecting the cosmic macrocosm.

Ancient cultures had a deep insight into the nature of breathing, and recognized it as not merely a physical function but a supreme conveyor of cosmic energy. In the *Upanishads*, the universal principle in each human being is equated with *prana*, the “breath of life” or vital force animating the body and partaking of the Greater Life in which the individual and the universe are one. Lama Govinda:

We experience the very nature of life by surrendering ourselves to its rhythm, instead of interfering with it, because it is the rhythm of the universe that breathes through us . . . And while experiencing this, we receive and accept the vital forces (*prana*) of the universe with our whole being with every inhalation, and we surrender ourselves wholly with every exhalation. This makes us realize that life consists in a continuous process of taking and giving, receiving and relinquishing, of integration and renunciation, of a continuous exchange and a profound inter-relationship of all individual and universal forces. Whatever we receive, we have to give back; whatever we try to hold onto or to keep for ourselves, will harm us. Therefore the saying: “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it.” (19)

The Conditioned Body

Much of the time our sensations of the body are below the level of conscious awareness. We are disconnected from the body and unaware of its conditioned habits, resistances and tensions. The relaxed openness of the natural body has become calcified – a limited, confined and fragmented shadow of its original pristine state. The body has gradually become a nexus of “crystallized energy” as layers of tension and contraction in the cellular, skeletal, muscular and nervous systems of the body have built up over the years: Reich’s “body armoring.”

Unless there is sickness, pain or injury most people ignore the body and its sensations. Yet the body of even nominally healthy people is, more often than not, a repository of stored tension reflecting patterns of fear, anxiety, psychological resistances and emotional reactions. These may manifest as chronic contractions or inflammations of muscles and joints. Some of this bodily conditioning can be traced back to childhood experiences.

The body is conditioned through the tensions and contractions of the muscles and tendons, bones, and the nervous system structure, which leave a residue or “footprint” in the body. This chronic tension needs to be relaxed and released since it interferes with the normal functioning

of the body. Jean Klein: “Look at how the octopus moves effortlessly with all its limbs as one, or the panther running, and you see how restricted your body is. When you think of and feel your body you think of and feel the conditioned body. This is all you know as body – it has essentially become a congealed memory.” (20)

We unconsciously add extra tension to our bodies far in excess of the natural effort needed to perform the actions of everyday life:

It’s very rare for our body to hold only the tension it needs to keep functioning. See if you can observe your body during the day. If you have a minute between tasks, take a look and see what tension you’re holding. Most of the time, we’re doing what we’re doing, *and* we’ve added tension. It may be almost imperceptible or it may be very, very noticeable. Of course, we need to have enough tension to do whatever we’re doing. If we’re holding a cup of coffee, there has to be some tension to hold the cup up, or the coffee will spill. Life is a very simple matter. We’re just doing what we’re doing. But we add extra tension all the time. If you stop and feel your face, you will notice it’s usually a little bit tight. We don’t need that tension. We’re hardly ever operating with just the functional level of tension. Even if you don’t know what your automatic habits are, you probably know how they feel. Our unconscious habits and reactions make us rigid. Our bodies get tight. We may even get sick. (21)

In a sense, the body is a mirror of our inner psychological state. The heavily conditioned ego does not want to let go, resulting in a deep fear of releasing tension – patterns that have accumulated over time. Billy Doyle: “Buried in the structure of the body and in our breathing habits may be residues of anger or jealousy or trauma dating back to childhood. These psychological conditions may manifest as various knots of disease in the body. When we begin to release this frozen energy, the emotions that were originally associated with this contraction may come up. There may arise anger, there may arise tears.” (22)

Powerful emotions such as anger or fear can affect many functions of the body such as respiration, blood pressure, heart rate, and even cellular processes. By relaxing the body, and especially the facial muscles, the mind naturally begins to relax as well. Even individuals who have an apparently healthy and relaxed body, may not be aware of deeper levels of tension and resistance residing in their bodies. We are prisoners of conditioning: “Disorder is created by a multitude of tensions and complex automatized reactions, which themselves are the result of deeper levels of conditioning. Our postures, our gestures, our physical attitudes are endlessly the same. They define us, they are, ultimately, what we are, despite an imaginary identity portrayed by the distorting mirror of our mind.” (23)

Emotions are reflected in the body as zones of tension. The body has its own inherent intelligence and knows which muscles are tense and which are not. However, most of this information never reaches the conscious mind – we don’t know which particular muscular

tensions need to be released and how to release them: “If I have kept my shoulders raised for thirty years because of a permanent fear, I first have to get rid of the fear. Then at some point, my body will send a signal, a sensation, to tell me that this defensive attitude isn’t required in the present circumstances, and my shoulders will relax. Eventually, new sensations will arise, from a more refined level, and if they are given the proper welcoming attention, a new letting go will take place at that level.” (24)

When working with strong emotions such as fear or anger, it is helpful to direct attention to the sensations in the body which accompany the emotion, and which are prior to the mind’s tendency to interpret and name them as “fear” or “anger.” By exploring the actual physical sensations, the light of awareness will dissipate the powerful hold of the emotion.

It is important to allow the body to naturally release stored up tensions and resistances. Since the body has its own organic memory and intelligence of harmony and health, it will free itself of defences and residues simply and spontaneously. Conceptualizing, analyzing and interfering with this releasing process is only counter-productive:

The chronic tensions and resistances in our body have been built up to defend who we think we are. When we begin to release them there arises also a fear of losing this identity or a feeling of being defenceless. It is a fear of the unknown, for who would I be without weight and density, this armour and the walls I have built around me? The more we understand that the fear is based on an illusion, that the self-image, the ego, has no more reality than a phantom, the more we will effortlessly give up what we are not. It is only through acceptance of what is – a welcoming – that the process can unfold. When we are overwhelmed by a situation, finding ourselves in a crisis, there is little we can do about it; it’s only afterwards that we have some perspective. But by becoming more intimate with ourselves, and by objectifying the reaction, sensing it in the body the moment it is triggered, we give ourselves space to see. We’ve stood back, we are no longer lost in it. Later, we become aware even before an emotional reaction comes up. (25)

Above all else we need to understand how the conditioning of the body supports the ‘I image’ or sense of a separate self: “From the gross feeling of contraction and density, to the subtle feeling of vibration and space we pass through various layers. As we let the layers of sensation unfold, the body will go through various stages of elimination. In this process we will discover that our primal body is vibration – subtle energy without centre or border. But if we hold on to the belief that our body is something heavy and solid, we will never arrive at this experience.” (26) Our normal sense of the body is difficult to overcome due to habit and the repeated reinforcement that we are separate individuals residing in a physical body:

We don’t truly know the real body; rather, what we experience when we wake up in the morning is largely memory. It is a pattern crystallized over time, more or less a set of defense mechanisms for the I-image. This set

of patterns that pervades every layer of the body unknowingly imprisons us in our past. It is frozen energy that gives us the feeling of contraction, weight, opacity and fixation. These conditioned sensations are super-imposed on the primal body, and sustain the 'I am the body' idea. We are, more particularly, localized in the forebrain, the thought factory. In listening to the body in this way, a choiceless welcoming, we are no longer an accomplice to the patterns and contractions. We have, as it were, stood back and let the body *be* the body. (27)

Observing Bodily Tension

Instead of a global, holistic sensation of their body, most people only perceive the body fractionally, when a specific part of our body draws our attention. Stress and tensions in the body arise from our reactions to environmental circumstances and personal interactions. The various areas of tension in the body reflect our fears, anxieties and resistances. They can be released by simply sensing them, by being aware of them perceptually: "Reactions are very deeply rooted in us and should be sensed as often as possible in daily life. As we have an organic memory of the natural, relaxed – the original – body, we can let go of these tensions and live in a kind of ground which is completely harmonious and appropriate to our actions. When you see that you are in tension, in reaction or contraction, see it without the slightest idea of changing it; just take note of it." (28)

We rarely pay attention to the state of our body, including its tensions and stresses. Simply observing the body can release the knots preventing a free flow of energy throughout the body. Buddhist teacher Namgyal Rinpoche: "Stop and take a look at your posture. See how you express yourself on the physical level. Hear the basic tone of the being in the voice; observe the tight neck, the taut muscles of the face. Look closely at your most negative posture; understand the correlation with past traumas. Start at the physical level and you will find the energy freer and more flowing." (29)

The initial stage of body work is to become friends with the body, to get to know its needs, peculiarities, strengths and weaknesses. When we shine the light of awareness on the body it speaks to us in its own language. This 'choiceless listening' is effortless and the natural function of awareness. The body has sometimes been compared to a musical instrument; through careful attention we are able to tune it and come to harmonization and a "melodic fluidity." But anticipation interferes with this quiet listening – there is end-gaining and we are back in the mechanical process of mind-judging, no longer in the moment. When our attention is free from expectation and criticism, the vast palette of body sensation naturally appears.

Ideally the body should be the servant to the higher-order function of the mind, but the tension it holds from persistent fear, anxiety and emotional wounds – often from childhood trauma – creates an impediment that prevents free and unconditioned responses to the ever-changing circumstances of life. But this can only be achieved by listening to the body rather

than mastering or controlling it. Conscious presence to the sensations of the body frees the frozen energy of long-held tensions and fixations, allowing for optimal functioning in life..

The observation of the body should be objective and impartial, without expectation or judgement. When heaviness or resistance is sensed in one part of the body, attention should be directed to parts which are more relaxed and transparent, and then returning the attention to the denser areas. This has been described as “flooding” the contracted areas with lighter, more fluid energies. With this movement of tension-free energy into a restricted zone of the body, a feeling of openness and relaxation enters the whole body. Whether in athletic pursuits or the arts of singing or playing music, one will have a free unconditioned body ready for action.

When we become aware of the habitual bodily tensions and stresses, it opens the possibility of a new understanding of the body. By paying conscious attention to the body, tension slowly dissipates, revealing the original unconditioned body. There is freedom from the residues of the past. Innocent observation is acceptance and welcoming of *what is*, devoid of judgement or resistance. This approach is gentle yet effective:

The body must be completely free from all anticipation and expectation, free from any residue from the past. It must become completely relaxed. The moment we take our body as an object of observation, we will see that we know only certain fractions of our body and it may be very difficult to feel the whole body. In these fractions there are contractions, heaviness and reactions. So, the moment our body becomes an object of innocent observation – in which the observer is free from expectation and free from memory – then in this innocent observation there is no place for an “I” or “me” which created the reactions and heaviness. There is no longer an accomplice to keeping the contractions in the body, and they become free. Then we come to a global feeling of our body. What we call unconditioned observation, innocent looking, has everything to do with a body which is free from any grasping or taking. (30)

Working with the body and its energies can often be more effective than using the mind to explore some of the barriers to a more healthy, integrated life. Spiritual investigators Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo convey their own personal experience as a couple:

At first we tried to meet our shadow and “resolve our issues” from an intellectual perspective, but as we went deeper it became clear that the only way forward was to focus on the semantic, which in turn revealed an entire universe of sensations and a whole new way of knowing ourselves. As the reactive forces of trauma are transmuted and we begin to integrate and weave the trapped energy into our being, our bodies became more alive, sensitive, and open. We grow more able to surrender to and experience life without judgements. (31)

Body work can be the opening to a deeper exploration of the mind and emotions, leading to an integration and harmonization of our physical, emotional and mental functions. This creates the foundation for a deeper penetration into higher levels of reality. Spiritual teachers often attest to the importance of body work in their own spiritual journey. Jean Klein describes his personal experience of yoga and its relaxing effect in *The Ease of Being*:

Exploring the body brought me to deeper layers of relaxation and this relaxation brought about the cessation of repetitive patterns in the body and mind. In welcoming the body I became more and more aware of the feeling of letting go, so in this way the yoga participated in the forefeeling of reality. But it only led me to where I no longer emphasized the object, the body, but the ultimate subject. Yoga brings you to a kind of alertness, a tranquility, and a tranquil body reflects a tranquil mind. But of course, you can come to the peaceful body-mind without yoga! (32)

The Relaxed Body

The body has a biological memory of its original natural state of relaxation and receptivity. Becoming aware of the regions of the body that are holding in tension is more efficacious than forcibly trying to relax and make the knots of tension go away – by observing and accepting them rather than fighting them. Billy Doyle: “What is important is not to try to relax but just to be aware of what is not relaxed. To be aware of the tensions. Not to fight them but to actually welcome them, not to make them a problem that I want to get rid of. The only thing to do is actually sit with them and allow them . . . In just being aware of the feeling, the sensation you are no longer actually creating the tension – you are just observing.” (33)

Many relaxation exercises and techniques are ego-based and are unable to achieve and sustain a more optimal state of relaxation. In *Eternity Now*, Frances Lucille explains this common conundrum:

The ultimate relaxation cannot be achieved as long as you identify yourself with your body. You may achieve a certain degree of vacuity, expansion, or lightness using sophisticated relaxation methods. At the end you may even have an apparently totally relaxed body, a blank body. So what? You are still caught in duality as a subject facing an absence of sensation . . . As long as we identify ourselves with a perceived body-mind, this identification maintains in existence blind zones in the body (areas which have not been explored, which are not open to consciousness) and localizations (areas of muscular tension). This black-and-white picture of bodily sensations is what we usually call “me” or “my body,” a mass of old patterns inherited from the past . . . Real letting-go takes place in the absence of an ego. As a result, the energies frozen in the old localizations are set free and expand into the surrounding space, the blind zones open up and become sensitive, and the entire psychosomatic structure gradually returns to its natural condition. (34)

Perhaps the simplest, but most effective, relaxation practice is simply sitting and doing nothing for a short period of time. Letting go and allowing our body and mind to deeply relax creates a state of presence and openness. Simply remaining quiet in the moment is a glimpse of timeless awareness: “How do we do non-doing? By relaxing naturally, though remaining quiet and alert. Sufi teacher Inayat Khan describes this as *impartial relaxation*. No effort. We are simply still and present. What arises, arises. What passes, passes.” (35)

Releasing tensions allows energy to flow unimpeded throughout the body, as well as slowing the breathing and calming the mind and emotions. When the body is fully relaxed, it finds its natural instinctive wisdom, which is no longer distorted by mental and emotional conditioning. The body is less dense and more open as tension dissolves, allowing a more conscious life to unfold as the body reintegrates on a higher vibrational level and becomes a willing servant of the mind’s directives. Tibetan Buddhist teacher Tarthang Tulku: “By relaxing and letting everything become tranquil the breath grows calm, energy flows smoothly through the body and senses, balancing our inner circulation. As mental and bodily patterns soften, the quality of our inner awareness comes closer to our natural state of mind, which is open and accepting.” (36)

When there is a state of total relaxation the energy that lies at the root of our existence has the opportunity to return to its source. Energy is no longer scattered and dissipated – there is a sense of integration and wholeness, allowing for an emergence of a direct perception of reality:

In the total relaxation, in the state of sustained silence, the wholeness of energy, the totality of energy begins to operate. In other words, intelligence which is sensitivity, which is love, begins to operate. A different kind of perception is born. Silence as a dimension of consciousness comes to life, if the state of total relaxation is sustained. It is difficult to be in a real state of total relaxation because as soon as you find yourself in that state, the ego that was in abeyance comes back . . . If one does not turn away, if one is not frightened by the reaction of the ego, then the intelligence and the sensitivity which were blocked by cerebral movement, which were blocked by knowledge and experience, gets released. In the state of egolessness the non-dual perception and the non-dual response as a new quality begins to manifest itself. (37)

Certain exercises and practices can be easily performed during the day to aid relaxation:

- Slow, deep breathing
- Maintaining a direct awareness of each of the five senses
- Throwing out negative energy through the fingertips
- Bathing and changing one’s clothes to remove the impurities of urban living
- Eating wholesome, healthy foods

Our sense of self is usually localized in the head, while we pay little attention to the rest of the body. We typically ignore the face and head as a source of tension. There is no need to

tense our eyeballs in an unconscious effort to grasp what we are seeing – an instinctive attempt to “take it all in.” In the activity of the senses, the eyes play a significant role and the optic nerves are generally in tension. The energy employed in seeing is more or less captured by unconscious grasping. The eyes and the facial muscles store layers of tension that can be gently relaxed by a simple awareness of the surface areas of the face.

An initial step in relaxing the whole body, then, is to soften the eyes and the regions around the eyes. Here is a very simple exercise to relax the eyes that can be performed in virtually any circumstance: “Soften your gaze into a state of receptivity, and let the world come to you as you look out from the back of your brain. Each time that you remember to do that, your nervous system will shift into relaxation mode.” (38) This exercise demonstrates how we can consciously shift from a focused, one-pointed concentration to the more panoramic awareness of an open, relaxed gaze.

There are more general exercises for relaxing tension and energy blocks in the mind and body. The basic principle is to focus attention on particular areas of tension and then relax the knots of tension by letting go. In *The Healing Power of Mind*, Tibetan Buddhist scholar and teacher Tulku Thondup describes this process:

When you feel stressed, first concentrate on feeling where the pressure is. Often you can release the stress simply by bringing awareness to it, and letting go. If muscles are tense in a certain place, they will relax once awareness of letting go is there. Release the stress or worry in your head by relaxing the muscles of your face and forehead, and by letting go of all tension. You could also imagine that a healing light is opening up and relaxing the tightness or pain in your head. Another simple release is to stretch your arms high over your head and tense your hands into fists. Breathe in as you stretch, clench your muscles, hold the position for a moment, then release as you breathe out. A good loud yawn can help you during the release. Feel that all tensions are released as your fists open and let go. If it is helpful, imagine your out-breath as a warm wind that sweeps away the stress. Release the breath into the welcoming infinity of space. (39)

Relaxing the body is only an initial stage in the spiritual journey. At a deeper level there is a relaxed acceptance of whatever experience appears in our consciousness. Psychologist John Astin poetically describes this state: “Relax. Relax all effort and allow the ceaseless flow of experience to unfold; as it unfolds, to arise as it arises, to flower and subside, in its own time and its own rhythm. Relax into what is. Relax into whatever is here . . .” (40)

Spiritual traditions such as Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Advaita emphasize a natural approach to life which meets each experience of the moment with suppleness and acceptance. Action flows from the actual demands of life, not according to our personal desires or notions of what we think life should be. As the need for life to unfold in a certain way fades, tension is slowly released and we return to our natural state of unconditioned being.

Access to the state of pure awareness is largely dependent on the qualities of attention and relaxation we bring to bear in the present moment. With deep relaxation and artful attention, a new quality of presence can enter into consciousness. Professor of physics Shimon Malin describes his own experience:

Relaxation and joy are spreading through the body. Whatever appears to the attention appears with a kind of transparency. As I relax, a flow enters me. In my ordinary mode, tension blocks this entry. But now I am just sitting here, wishing for nothing . . . I see that simple attention to the moment is the way out of the tyranny of mentation and emotionalism. When the attention is truly on the moment it is free of the past. The movement toward opening starts, then, with relaxation. (41)

Detailed descriptions of body relaxation techniques are available in a number of sources:

- Relaxing the eyes and whole body: Jean Klein *Living Truth* (pp. 32-33)
- A guided relaxation of the body: Jean Klein *The Book of Listening* (pp. 183-184)
- Gurdjieff's "Collection Exercise": Hugh Ripman *Questions and Answers Along the Way* (pp. 67-70)
- The "Body Scan": Jon Kabat-Zinn *Coming to Our Senses* (pp. 250-253)
- A series of practical exercises to relax various parts of the body: Billy Doyle *Yoga in the Kashmir Tradition* (pp. 23-28, 31-34, 36-53, 58-63, 64-75, 76-83, 87-90, 95-102).

The Inner Energy Body

The concept of a 'subtle energy body' nested within the physical body appears in many cultures throughout history:

One of the most persistent beliefs held by man throughout the ages is that his physical form is but the reflection of a series of subtle bodies, and that in their totality these invisible interpenetrating forms reflect the nature of God. Most, if not all, of the spiritual and philosophical writings and teachings that have emerged through the ages bear witness to this concept. It is clear that the ancient Egyptians, Chinese and Greeks, the Indians of North America, the tribes of Africa, the Polynesian Kahunas, the Incas, the early Christians, the Vedic seers of India, and the medieval alchemists and mystics of Europe, have all in one way or another seen man and the study of his anatomy, both physical and subtle, as key to the nature of God and the universe. (42)

The concept of subtle energy bodies was prominent in ancient Chinese Taoism as it described the circulation of finer energies in the physical body and provided detailed maps of the channels of these energy patterns. A similar concept is found in Hindu Tantra and Tibetan

Buddhism, in which subtle channels called *nadis* distribute currents of vital energy (*prana*) throughout the body. And in esoteric Christianity four subtle bodies were posited: the carnal, natural, spiritual and divine bodies. In more recent times, the doctrine of subtle bodies was a prominent feature of Theosophy, which used the terminology of a “physical body, astral body, mental body and causal body.” Gurdjieff employed similar nomenclature in his Fourth Way teachings. In talks with his students, he elaborated:

According to an ancient teaching, traces of which may be found in many systems, old and new, a man who has attained the full development possible for man, *consists of four bodies*. These four bodies are composed of substances which gradually become finer and finer, mutually interpenetrate one another, and form four independent organisms, standing in a definite relationship to one another but capable of independent action. (43)

The most sophisticated model of the subtle bodies was developed in India as part of a vast system of cosmology. The Sanskrit word *prana* refers to the vital cosmic energy of the universe – an infinite, all-pervading energy which sustains all the diverse forms of life on earth: “All aspects and principles that constitute the universe, or macrocosm, are embodied in all the microcosmic forms that constitute the universe – just as the mighty ocean is completely represented in a single drop of water from that ocean. The human body is sustained by the same *prana* that sustains the universe, and it is through the manifestation of *prana* that all bodily functions are possible and coordinated.” (44)

Ancient manuals of yoga anatomy describe a network of thousands of energy channels or *nadis* through which currents of *prana* flow, energizing and sustaining various parts of the body, especially at certain junctions or *chakras*. *Chakra* is a Sanskrit word meaning “disc” or “wheel.” They are focal points or energy centres in the body corresponding to certain nerve plexuses and major organs. Traditionally, seven main *chakras* are identified, ranging from the root or base of the spine to the crown of the head:

The ancient description of *nadis* and *chakras* bears a remarkable resemblance to modern anatomical descriptions of nerves and plexuses, respectively. Some scientists have tried to establish a correspondence between the two systems, but the assumption behind such an attempt is that the nerves and plexuses belong to the physical body while the *nadis* and *chakras* belong to what is known in yoga science as the subtle body. In other words, they are the counterparts of the nerves and plexuses, respectively. The currents of *prana* flowing through these *nadis* are the subtle counterparts of the nerve impulses. The yogis developed this mapping ability through introspective contemplation. The physical body is built around the subtle framework of the *nadis*, then, and the sustenance of the body is through the flow of energy of *prana* through this network of *nadis*. In the average individual the dynamic and creative aspect of the energy of *prana* is only an infinitesimal fraction of the total energy of *prana*, the major part of it being in a potential, or seed, state. (45)

The rhythm of breathing influences the pattern of *pranic* energy flow that underlies and sustains the physical body. This energy can be conceptualized as a second body or “vital sheath.” The body itself is subservient to the subtler energy body: its existence is based on something more fundamental than itself.

There is a relationship between *prana* and the gross physical body and, equally, between *prana* and the subtler level of the mind. Thus *prana* is the link between body and mind, since its energy is the basis of life and vitality. When a person dies, we say that they have “expired,” as both the breath and the life force have separated from the corporeal body. Many spiritual traditions recognize that the physical body is also the abode of the subtle energies that infuse the natural world and the whole of reality with life and consciousness:

Western science now confirms that body and mind are far more related than Platonic/Cartesian duality would suggest: mental attitudes can affect healing processes, and somatic conditions influence thought. Thus it is no surprise that body-oriented practices such as yoga, exercise and diet can powerfully open consciousness to its essential condition by reducing the chatter of mental noise that ordinarily obstructs it. On one level, these practices simply relax the mind by relaxing the body – or in the case of diet, by purifying the body of intoxicants. Yet it is also possible that spiritual work such as yoga and advanced forms of meditation enable subtle energies to flow more freely and connect with their source as well . . . Yoga, tai chi, qigong are disciplines that are thousands of years old. All of them have nondual perception among their central goals, a perception by the body-mind as a whole. Simply being in nature, if the mind is quieted and the heart is opened, can provide an intimation of immortality, a melting away of the distinction between self and other. (46)

The inner energy body connects to the greater cosmos, creating an invisible energy field that gives life to the corporeal body. The energy of this body is sometimes perceived by those with mystical insight as a luminous body of light. It is the life force that animates the body – our sense of *aliveness* that can be felt throughout our body. Eckhardt Tolle: “The body that you can see and touch is only a thin illusory veil. Underneath it lies the invisible inner body, the doorway into Being, into Life Unmanifested. Through the inner body, you are inseparably connected to the One Life . . . Being can be *felt* as the ever-present *I am* that is beyond name and form. To feel and thus to know that you *are* and to abide in that deeply rooted state is enlightenment.” (47)

The body that you can see and touch cannot take you into Being. But that visible and tangible body is only an outer shell, a limited and distorted perception of a deeper reality. In your natural state of connectedness with Being, this deeper reality can be felt every moment as the animating presence within you. So to inhabit the body is to feel the body from within, to feel the life inside the body and thereby come to know that you are beyond the outer

form. But that is only the beginning of an inward journey that will take you ever more deeply into a realm of great stillness and peace, yet also of great power and vibrant life. At first, you may only get fleeting glimpses of it, but through them you will begin to realize that you are not just a meaningless fragment in an alien universe, briefly suspended between birth and death. Underneath your outer form, you are connected with something so vast, so immeasurable and sacred, that it cannot be conceived or spoken of. (48)

The light of awareness has the power to dissolve habitual patterns of tension and restructure the conditioned body, allowing the subtle energy body to emerge and “shine.” When the body is permeated with conscious presence it feels weightless, transparent and fully alive. Frances Lucille, a direct student of Jean Klein, discusses this process of transmutation:

Awareness gradually pervades the whole structure and texture of the body, dissolving the somatic residues of the ego. As bodily awareness deepens, heaviness and tension disappear. The body is felt to be transparent, empty, and at some point, “luminous.” It is no longer sensed as a material mass limited at the surface of the skin, but rather as a subtle current expanding into the surrounding space, and, at a later stage, including it. When this becomes our experience, it can be truly said that we stand as awareness in the presence of bodily sensations and perceptions, in other words, that the world is in us. This transfiguration of the body is made possible by the understanding that we are not a limited entity, which in turn, establishes the proper welcoming attitude. This understanding is the instantaneous apperception of our welcoming presence, awareness, which destroys the false identifications in the flames of our eternal splendor. (49)

Unlike the physical body, the energy body does not change with time or age. When the physical body is completely relaxed, the subtler energy levels of the body are freed and can be directly experienced: “The feeling of the energy body eats up the feelings of solidity and we feel ourselves becoming more transparent, more open, free on many levels . . . It is what gives the body life. It permeates the whole body; it surrounds the physical body. The more we experience it, the more there is harmony and health on all levels.” (50)

Once the perception has unfolded in awareness, energy is liberated and dissolves in light. This light, this energy, is spontaneously felt on all levels of our phenomenal being. We become aware of a new body-feeling, a feeling of energy, light, space, emptiness, expansion. This body is the real body, the organic body. When you have once felt this body, its feeling will return to you often, because it is older than any conditioned body. It is your original body. The cells have an ancient organic memory of their perfect state. So it is important, when you have once felt it, not to return to the old patterns. Sustain it. Remember it in all situations in daily life. For the fully established person, the body-mind is truth because it is a perfect expression

of truth. Only such a one knows what the “temple of God” means. Take care of your temple! (51)

The energy body can be used in healing along with other techniques such as meditation, visualization and affirmations. A relaxed body, natural breathing and a quiet mind support the full expansion of the energy body and we can return to our natural home in pure awareness. There is a joy and celebration of existence when the body is free of its conditioned tensions and movements are as free as “a wild animal on the savanna.” Billy Doyle:

The energy body surrounds and permeates the physical body; it gives it life. In its relaxation it permeates the space around us so that we feel ourselves completely expanded in space without centre or periphery. When the energy feeling is strong in the hands they can be used for healing. This is usually more effective when the hands are held several inches above the body. They can also be used for self-healing. The healer must be free of themselves; they are only a channel for the energy. It is only through working with the energy body that we free ourselves of fixed patterns and memories that dominate the physical body, so that when we subsequently bring in the physical part it shares in this freedom. (52)

When the body is completely relaxed and the mind quiet and in a state of openness, a sensation of the body expanding into space may emerge. All limitations of bodily tension and resistance vanish, leaving only receptivity and a welcoming to *that which is*: “When you listen to the body a whole palette of sensations opens and the body becomes expanded. It feels more fluid, there is no border, no centre. This light, fluid body is the organic body and when you once become aware of it, it will solicit you. The organic awareness of expansion will be completely integrated in global awareness.” (53) This new sensation of expansion without limitation is accompanied by pure joy and happiness:

Don’t reject the body sensations and emotions that present themselves to you. Let them blossom fully in your awareness without any goal or any interference from the will. Progressively, the potential energy imprisoned in muscular tension liberates itself, and the return to fundamental stability takes place. This purification of body sensation is a great art. It requires patience, determination, and courage. It finds its expression at the level of sensation through a gradual expansion of the body into the surrounding space, and a simultaneous penetration of the somatic structure by that space. When the attention frees itself from perceptions that hold it in thrall, it discovers itself as that self-luminous space which is the true substance of the body. The body is expanded to the size of the universe and contains all things tangible and intangible in its heart. Nothing is external to it. We all have this body of joy, this awakened body. We are all complete, with no missing parts. Just explore your kingdom and take possession of it knowingly. (54)

The Awakened Body

The three functions of thinking, feeling and sensation are the transmitters and receivers of our experience of ourselves and the world. The energies of the body are necessary to balance the energies of the mind and emotions in order to create a harmonious whole: “A new balance appears in myself around the subtle sensations of an inner presence I would call ‘attention of the body.’ I am then aware of myself as a dynamic field of forces. Each of these functional apparatuses (thought, feeling and sensation) carries a specific energy and a specific attention or sensitivity. When mobilized together, they contribute to the rare experience of being really present, aware of oneself.” (55) The body acts as an anchor for this global experience of reality:

To ignore or abuse the body is mistaken spirituality. When we honor the body with our attention, we begin to reclaim our feelings, our instincts, our life. Out of this developing attention we can then experience a healing of the senses. The eyes, the tongue, the ears, and the sense of touch are rejuvenated. Colors are pure, flavors fresh, we can feel our feet on the earth as if we were children again. The cleansing of the senses allows us to experience the joy of being alive and a growing intimacy with life here and now. (56)

In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness of the body is associated with an organic sense of being grounded, a sense of being alive. The body is an easier object of attention than the constantly changing movement of thoughts and feelings. The practice can involve the sensation of the body as a whole or focusing on specific parts of the body and the sensations connected to them: “This can include sensations such as discomfort in a knee, or in the lower back, a headache if it arises, or for that matter, subtle or vivid feelings of ease, comfort, or pleasure within the body. Sensations might include feelings of pressure and temperature, or tingling, itching, pulsation, aching, throbbing, light touch from the air currents, warmth or coolness anywhere in the body; the possibilities are endless.” (57)

Our body is quite obvious as an object of attention, not subtle like thoughts or emotions. We can stay aware of the body easily, but only if we remember to do so. The remembering is difficult, not the awareness. Remember to use your body as a vehicle for awakening . . . Just patiently practice feeling what is there – and the body is *always* there – until it becomes second nature to know even the small movements you make. It is very simple. Practice again and again, bringing your attention back to your body. This basic effort, which paradoxically is a relaxing back into the moment, gives us the key to expanding our awareness from times of formal meditation to living mindfully in the world. Do not underestimate the power that comes to you from feeling the simple movements of your body throughout the day. (58)

Many people view the body conceptually rather than directly experiencing it as a felt reality, thereby losing touch with the body’s natural grounding quality. The body is our connection

with the earth and the feminine principle. It is the direct source and expression of our innate and instinctive wisdom. The body needs to be respected and honoured. Jack Kornfield: “Enlightenment must be lived here and now through this very body or else it is not genuine. In this body and mind we find the cause of suffering and the end of suffering. For awakening to be an opening into freedom in this very life, the body must be its ground.” (59)

Enlightenment flowers not as an ideal, but in the miraculous reality of our human form, with its pleasures and pains. No master can escape this truth, nor does enlightenment make the vulnerability of our body go away. The Buddha had illnesses and backaches. Sages such as Ramana Maharshi, Karmapa, Krishnamurti and Suzuki Roshi died of cancer in spite of their holy understanding. Their example shows we must find awakening in sickness and in health, in pleasure and in pain, in this human body as it is. How do we touch this body of life, the joys and sorrows of it? An embodied awakening neither denies nor reviles the body, nor does it grasp and mindlessly indulge in pleasures. In embodied awakening we become present for the life that is given us, respectful of what the Tibetans call “this precious human form.” We must include the sacredness of the body if we are to be wise. (60)

Shining the light of awareness on the body is a practical method of returning to the reality of the present moment: “The body is here and now. Undoubtedly, you’re experiencing your body now. Begin to just notice, just feel, and bring into consciousness this obvious fact that we tend not to notice, not pay attention to. And yet it is a reality of this present moment, this body. For every one of us, our body is present, here and now, whatever condition it might be in.” (61)

When we focus attention on the body, there is a natural quieting of mental and emotional activity. There is a sense of consciously inhabiting the body and an awareness of the whole field of sensation – we are in touch with the basic reality of present-moment existence. Yet most people rarely inhabit their bodies. We need to value the body as a ‘sacred temple of perception.’ Then the body is a gateway to an awakened state of consciousness: “The body is a wonderful tool for stepping out of time, since it is always appearing here and now; never in the past or future. When we are consciously feeling the body, its sensing or breathing, it draws attention from compulsive thinking. Attention effortlessly shifts from the head into the body and timeless presence.” (62)

One of the prerequisites for many spiritual exercises is a body that is centered with all its functions at rest. Only when the body is in a relaxed state of harmony and balance is there a foundation to support such practices as mindfulness, sitting meditation, concentration, and breathing exercises. These practices are grounded in the direct experience of the body or bodily sensations. In this way, the body acts as a crucible for present-moment awareness. Patty de Llosa emphasizes this point in *Awakening Body Consciousness*: “When grounded in sensation, whether in a moment of deep stillness or vibrant action, a new level of feeling arises. Then, depending on how roundly we can listen to the singing in all our cells, Body Conscious-

ness floods in, along with a sense of the sacredness of such a moment. At that point, the mind becomes a mirror and the body a temple.” (63)

The body can be an open door to a deeper reality. Working with the body can give us a taste or glimpse of our real nature as pure awareness. But it requires steady patience to reach this state of being as the entrenched conditioning of our body and mind presents a persistent obstacle. Billy Doyle: “The presence of the body in awareness is discontinuous, but awareness, the background, is continuous. In this process we carry back the object to its generic form, eliminating its changing nature. The body is thus a pointer to awareness. The purpose of all its objects is to remind us of our real nature: awareness, consciousness. The world is thus not a problem, but a continual reminder of who we are. We can also say that all so-called objects are consciousness celebrating itself.” (64)

Until there is real understanding, our body, senses and mind, including our breathing, reflect the egoistic state, which manifests as contraction, defense, grasping and fear. Because we are so identified with a particular body-mind that we call ‘myself,’ we are asked to let it be an object in awareness. We are only the witness to the unfolding perception. This brings a feeling of space, a detachment from what we have habitually taken ourselves to be. Of course, for normal functioning the body needs a certain physiological tension – the problem arises when the tension is psychological and based on fear, resistance and habit. The layers of tension in the body are often chronic and deep-seated; This approach needs time and dedication. At first the new feeling of the body will probably be intermittent, with old patterns still manifesting. We need to be alert to this and sustain our new sense of spaciousness throughout our daily activities. However, the cells of our body have an organic memory and once we discover our original body the new feeling invites us and becomes more and more permanent. (65)

The illusion that the body is a solid unchanging mass with fixed borders is ingrained in human consciousness. But when we carefully explore the sensations of the body a different picture emerges. The body is not limited in space and time, but transcends both. It is more like a fluid process or field of energy than an immobile object. In *Nothing to Grasp*, Joan Tollifson explores this important distinction:

Everything is changing, so what we call “a body” is not really the same “thing” from one instant to the next. No continuous form exists or stands apart from everything else in the universe. Everything is one undivided, boundless event. Tune into sensing rather than thinking, and it is immediately clear that this so-called “body” is not a solid, enduring *thing* at all. It’s a mass of ever-changing, vibrating, pulsing sensations and activities. In the world of sensation, you cannot actually find where the body begins and ends. When we *think* about the body, it seems solid and persisting and separate from everything else. When we *sense* the body instead, we discover ever-changing, undivided form-

lessness or flux . . . In fact, your body includes the entire universe because nothing is really separate from anything else. Your body is dependent upon and made up of sunlight, water, air, food, stardust and atomic energy – we could say that the whole universe is appearing as you. And furthermore, you might notice that the whole universe is appearing *in* you. This imaginary boundary that we call “I” is an idea, a mental image, a kind of mirage. (66)

Through self-inquiry we can challenge the unquestioned assumption that *I am my body*. This belief is based on three core concepts: there is an entity called “I” separate from the external world; this entity possesses a body; the entity is identical with the body:

The “I am not the body” pointer that we hear in many spiritual teachings is an attempt to point beyond the illusion of encapsulation and separation. It is an attempt to question the exclusive identification with the body as what “I” am and the tendency to take the body (its condition, appearance, tendencies, behaviors and abilities) personally. The “I am not the body” pointer is an attempt to point out that “the body” is a concept we have learned, *not* our actual present moment *experience*, which is actually boundless and seamless, ever-changing flux . . . The real illusion is how we *think* about the body, how we conceptualize and abstract it, how we imagine it to be solid, separate, independent and persisting. And above all, how we imagine an owner who occupies the body, a “me” who is encapsulated inside, steering the body through life like a car or a ship. (67)

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