

## Embodied Awareness

*So what is to be done?*

*I'm suggesting a return to a primordial language.*

*One that exists as the deepest knowledge and expression that humanity knows.*

*It predates spoken language, it has its roots in the emergence of awe.*

*It is present in everyone, as an elemental music and reflection of molecular and stellar movement.*

*It is a genetic design built into leaf patterns and the bobbing of sea horses.*

*It is eminently present to children, we have educated it out of them.*

*But it is the story of our place in the universe and we must begin to tell that story again.*

*What we are losing is our ability to speak to the whole.*

*The songs of celebration, the poetry of praise.*

Author unknown

When we live in exile from the sensate reality of the body, we live in exile from the source of our aliveness. The only place that we can reconnect with this aliveness is in the body. Of course we all have bodies, yet few of us truly inhabit our bodies. We may live a short distance from the body divorced from our feelings, sensations, intuitions, and instincts. The body may seem like a foreign land that we have read about but never personally visited. And just as we may come to know a foreign land through the stories we've heard and the pictures we've seen, the actual reality of the place can never be known until we have walked, eaten, smelled, touched, and been there ourselves. When we begin to live in the body again, we take up citizen-

ship in our personal residence. In this way we come home to the body.

When we are not at home in our body, we divest ourselves of our somatic reality. Because the body is the only place where we can have access to our feelings and thoughts, ignoring our body affords us some distance from the content of our inner world. We may unconsciously believe that leaving the body is one way of leaving all those onerous feelings and thoughts behind. Unfortunately, in disassociating from what may be painful, we also disassociate from what may be pleasurable. Even if we do pay attention to our bodies, this attention may be steeped in negativity. As one student admitted, "The only two parts of my body I like are my nose and my ankles." Or we may ignore or deflect the feelings that arise from our body. All of these strategies not only distance us from our most immediate reality, our physical body, they distance us from life itself. When we begin to live in the body again, we discover that we have an internal environment that is as rich as that of any country and in a constant state of flux and change.

We would do well to ask why so many of us drop our bodies long before our mortal end. When the body is viewed as an apparatus for carrying the head around, we leave ourselves prone to the tyranny of our intellect and the justification and defense of the rational mind. This may give us a nifty sense of control over our lives. While the rational mind is a necessary instrument for discriminative awareness, it is not the only means by which we come to know something. We also come to know through the feeling in our gut, the hair that rises on our neck, or a "sense" that tells us to get out now. The rational mind houses our ego, and a well-developed ego gives us a healthy sense of our own worthiness and is of itself a good thing to have. The rational mind gives our thoughts some grounding, which is also a good thing.

Yet the rational mind also houses our executive ego, which sees itself as the protector of our "I." This executive ego does not take lightly to anyone or anything interfering with its dictates. This part of the ego manifests largely as puffed-up self-importance and spends a

great deal of its time defending its "self." As the representative of the executive ego, the rational mind has the advantage of being highly trained, frequently exercised (and obeyed), and, not so incidentally, heavily invested in perpetuating its own dominant position in the chain of command.

By the time most of us have reached early adulthood, our executive ego has had a doctorate education while our bodily instincts may still be in kindergarten. We may have become accustomed to ignoring or overriding our inner instincts, mainly because they do not tally with the grand plan of our executive ego. Our mind may tell us that it's a good idea to stay at our job for exactly three more years, but our body may have other thoughts on the matter. The executive ego tells us to plow through our fatigue even if it's the first day of a difficult period, while the body cries out for an afternoon nap. We may become such experts at living outside the reach of our bodily instincts that we start to navigate our lives purely from our rational minds, leaving behind our gut instincts and our heartfelt desires. Our inner wisdom, which is guided by the body, does not take lightly to this dismissal. Navigating our lives with only one instrument of perception is like setting out on a journey across the ocean with a compass while ignoring the movement of the wind, water, and stars. In the Katha Upanishad we're told that there is a physical location to this inner wisdom:

That through which one enjoys form,  
Taste, smell, sound,  
Touch, and sexual union is the Self.  
Can there be anything not known to That  
who is the One in all?

Katha Upanishad 2.3<sup>1</sup>

Unlike many spiritual and religious traditions, which further disenfranchise us from the support of our embodied self, Yoga stands apart as a tradition that has always recognized the importance of the body and mind living in harmonious relationship to each other. Yogis

recognized that the physical manifestation of the body was but a form animated by something greater than itself. The same force that moves the tides, opens a flower, or creates lightning in a storm animates our bodies. This life force moves the breath, the fluids, and the current flowing through our nerves as well as the inner workings of each and every cell. This animating principle is the force behind all the organs of perception: hearing, touch, taste, smell, and sight. Although not itself a solid substance, this life force infuses the body and manifests as the light shining from our eyes, the glow of the skin, and the timbre of the voice. As this force moves through the body, it influences the shape and form of our structure, creating our posture, the rhythm of our walk, and the character of our faces. Everything that has ever happened to us—our birth, the fall from a tree at the age of six, our thoughts and feelings, what we eat, the climate in which we live—is inscribed upon our body, creating a living archaeological record. When we develop an awareness of the interior movement that permeates the body, we gain access to the movement of our minds. Yoga is a means of reviving our connection to this natural wisdom.

When we practice the *asanas*, or Yoga postures, we begin to reunite ourselves once again with the contents of consciousness. Through rejoining the body, we learn to become internally literate once again. The physical literacy that Yoga offers us goes far beyond that recognized by Western science. Such was the uncompromising belief of ancient yogis that every part of the body could become conscious, was indeed consciousness itself, that they mapped an inner geography of the body that reflected the force behind form. They were interested not just in the function of the organs and tissues but also in the way in which the elements of nature—earth (*prithvi*), water (*ap*), fire (*tejas*), air (*vayu*), and space (*akash*)—interacted with one another, and how a balance or imbalance of these elements created health or disease. Just as the laws and regulations that govern the orderly working of a city are invisible yet nonetheless determine the direction, shape, and form of all action, the yogis were interested in discovering the underlying laws of nature. In doing so they recognized different layers, or *koshas*,



to the body—interpenetrating frequencies from the gross flesh to the most subtle energetic infrastructures. They also recognized that the *prana*, or life force infusing the body, moved in particular directions and that the subtle control of this life force could shape the movement of consciousness. Thus, becoming aware of the physical body was not distinguished from awareness of consciousness itself.

In the West we have come to view the body as an object, to exercise “it” as a separate entity from ourselves, and to command and control the body. This extract from *The Human Body*, a book designed to educate children, sums it up:

You can think of your body as a space capsule with your head as the command module and your trunk as the service module. Your head contains your brain, the computer which guides and controls the human space mission. . . . The brain also has control centers which govern the machinery in the service module. They automatically regulate the rate and rhythm of your heart and your breathing and tell you when to drink and when to eat. As you can see, the computer in your head controls your life.<sup>2</sup>

When the body becomes an “it,” we become someone doing something to somebody—always in a state of disassociation. Further, our definition of physical fitness has primarily focused on the superficial appearance of the body. So obsessed are we with this reductionistic view of the body that we have videos whose sole purpose is to produce “buns of steel” or “abs to die for” and books promising a “hard body.” This obsessive attention to what can be seen on the exterior prevents us from developing the kind of interior awareness that gives us access to our deepest insights. Further, the physical armoring of the body so common in our models of fitness causes a numbing of subtler sensation and feeling and, not so coincidentally, dampens any possible awareness we might cultivate of deeper body systems.

Nowhere in the entire literature of Yoga do we see this preoccupation with the outer wrappings of the body. Rather, the fitness of the

gross, or *annamaya kosha*, layer of the body is inferred from the inner health of the subtle body.

Health, a light body, freedom from craving,  
A glowing skin, sonorous voice, fragrance  
Of body: these signs indicate progress  
In the practice of meditation.

Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2.12<sup>3</sup>

In the Yoga-Sutra we are told that bodily perfection manifests as beauty, grace, a diamondlike glow, and supreme strength (3.46).

If we imagine the body as a community, with each body system and each layer a representative of consciousness, our Western expression of the body is limited almost entirely to the loudmouth of the body representatives, the musculoskeletal system, while the other internal systems such as the organs, fluids, and glands remain veritable wallflowers within our awareness. Since the musculoskeletal system is energized by the sympathetic nervous system (the part of the central nervous system responsible for fright, fight, flight, or a fake-it response), when we are in our muscle mind we tend to operate from the high notes of our nervous system. Our sympathetic nervous system is primarily engaged with sensing what is “out there” and in protecting us from danger. Primarily existing in and expressing ourselves from this exterior level keeps our attention chronically focused outward. Without the base support of our parasympathetic nervous system, which governs respiration, relaxation, and functions such as digestion, our somatic reality can become ungrounded. For this reason, the *asanas*, or Yoga postures, were traditionally practiced very slowly, with each movement synchronized to the breath, in order to balance the nervous system and open a perceptual gateway to the parasympathetic nervous system. This makes us available to our feeling function.

When we practice *asanas* from an interior perspective, we bring our minds back into the body. Instead of directing the body as a separate

entity, we relocate our minds within our body and begin to listen to the nonverbal, nonmental information contained within the soma. As we give our full attention to every breath, movement, and the subtlest of sensations, the body becomes mindful, and the mind becomes embodied. In so doing, we directly experience the body as an opaque form of consciousness, and we start to see the intimate relationship between the contents of what we think, feel, and imagine and our physical reality. In this reconciliation between body and mind we begin to experience a unitive rather than divisive state. This is what distinguishes the authentic practice of hatha Yoga from mere stretching. If we read a book or watch TV while our body marches on the treadmill, we actually create a form of mental and physical retardation and reinforce our disconnection from our body wisdom.

Since our Western cultural inheritance precludes a whole relationship to the body, it is not at all surprising that hatha yoga here has often been reinvented as a sophisticated form of calisthenics whose sole purpose is to make the body beautiful and to increase longevity. These things hatha yoga does well, but such goals are not the primary goal of yoga practice, and when we practice in a way that causes this unhealthy identification with the body, we are merely doing exercises with Sanskrit names. The practice becomes bent to accommodate the perception of the body as an "it" rather than requiring us to bend our minds and stretch beyond our objectified perceptual leanings. When our primary imperative shifts from attaining a form to developing an intimate connection with the life force moving through that form, we are reclaiming the *only* part of the practice that ultimately can have any relevance for us—finding out who we really are. And for this purpose hatha yoga is an exceptional system for becoming aware not only of the body but also of the life force that animates it and us.

The limitless nature of consciousness is mirrored in the *asana* repertoire itself. A testament to the vast creativity of our yogic forebears, the repertoire is drawn from nature, with each posture representing some aspect or expression of creation. We practice being the expression of trees, insects, birds, mammals, children, sages, gods, and

mountains. Every *asana* that has come down to us today began with an authentic inner impulse that was felt and experienced by someone at some time and then recorded so that it might be shared. Literally translated as "comfortable seat," the word *asana* means to relax into the consciousness of life as it manifests through the expression of each posture.

When we practice *asanas* we try to rediscover the origin of each movement and thus the original meaning of each gesture. This discovery cannot be made by simply mimicking another person or mechanically reproducing the postures. For the *asanas* to transform us, we enter the total feeling state of that form. By becoming a fish, bird, tree, or mountain, we reinvoke our connectedness with all creation at each stage of evolution.

The process of practicing *asanas* can be codified into a number of distinct stages that we progressively cycle through. The stages build in successive layers, with each stage providing a platform for the support of the next.

## FEELING WHAT IS

When we enter an *asana* we start by feeling what is. We observe the mind-body entity from a neutral viewpoint, resting our attention like dust settling on a table, lightly and without pressure. When we observe from this neutral vantage point, the process of perception has no ideal and no agendas. We simply feel how we are and offer ourselves complete acceptance for whatever we are bringing to the mat. When we can bring an accepting presence to our observations we begin the process of befriending ourselves. This is a crucial first step, for without this neutral witness we cannot possibly know how we actually are, and thus we cannot know where to begin or how to skillfully work with ourselves in the practice. If we do not extend this goodwill toward ourselves our practice will always be a time of frustration and disappointment. Because of the neutrality of the witness, observation has the possibility of extending beyond our habitual



thought patterns. As we develop choiceless awareness we begin to see things not as we imagine they should be but as they really are.

### FEELING WHERE WE ARE STUCK

When we first enter a posture we are met by our ability or inability to take on this new form. We feel all the places where we hold tension. These areas of accumulated tension represent the repetition of our ideation process, that is, our thoughts, fears, tensions, and anxieties coalescing into distinct patterns of tension and form our unique individual posture or attitude to life. As we think, so we become. We also encounter the history of the body in the form of traumas from birth, injuries, illness, and emotional disruption from the past and present, and we open to the possibility that we can move beyond these limitations. So the first experience we have when we practice an *asana* is awareness of the places that do not yet yield beyond the perimeters of our current expression. This is often a discomforting moment. Our idea about how pleasant it will be to take a Yoga class often meets reality the very first time we bend forward and feel the excruciating pull of our hamstring muscles. If this were all that happened, there would be a very high attrition rate indeed, but fortunately we have the opportunity to go a step further by entering into a dialogue with this tension.

### JOINING WITH THE BREATH

We begin to join our awareness with the breath and to use the breath to "palpate" and feel places of tension. As we breathe we start to realize that there are three phases to each breath—arising, dissolving, and pausing. As we take in the symphony of sensation, we learn to synchronize our practice so that we expand with the incoming breath, relax effort on the outgoing breath, and pause in the silence between these two phases. As we become adept at uniting our breath, body, and mind into one action, we become intimate with the natural

rhythm of life as it arises out of stillness, manifests into form, and then dissolves back into stillness. We start to become comfortable with the fact that everything is changing and in flux and that we can ride this fluctuation skillfully. We also begin to understand that as sensations, thoughts, and feelings pass through us, they need not solidify. They need not bunch up inside us as knots of tension. We can be a person who occasionally feels tension rather than a tense person. That is, all of these passing sensations need not concretize and fuse our identity. As we become more accomplished, the body consciousness becomes more malleable, able to adapt and assume whatever expression most skillfully serves the moment.

### REFINING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LIFE FORCE

As we become more adept, we refine our position in each posture so that *prana*, or life force, moves through us clearly and with ease. To do this we must clarify our relationship to the ground, to gravity, and to space and also clarify the harmonious relationship between each part of the body to the whole. This involves finding a dynamic tension whereby we become effective conduits for the animating movement of *prana*. We are quite literally in the process of realigning ourselves with the rhythm of the universe. Having fallen out of sync with this primordial rhythm, we try to reestablish a harmony between ourselves and the world. This harmony is expressed when we can sit with elegance, stand erect, walk with grace, and lie down with ease.

This reanimation of the body cannot happen merely through putting the body in a position. Finding our natural rhythm happens through inquiry that is marked by curiosity, innocence, and playfulness. When we bring these three qualities to our inquiry, we start to get more and more comfortable with not knowing. The executive ego begins to relax, and our external commands drop away so we can become receptive to the information coming through the wisdom body.

We know instinctively how to align our bodies—how to open up our blocks and holding places. A teacher can help us tap into this

awareness, but ultimately finding our inner alignment is just that: an inside job. If we are receptive, the body will suggest to us subtle shifts of position that can bring about a better alignment. The key here is that we have to trust our inner instincts and stop overriding them with our intellect. Instead of directing the movement from the ambition of the habitual mind (invested as it so often is in quantity rather than quality, goal rather than process), we direct the movement through sensing and feeling and moment-to-moment deduction. Through this inner guidance, we learn to wait for opening moments when the body says *yes* and allows us to go farther into a movement. We also learn to pause respectfully at the edge of our resistance and to listen to the body's *no*. Working in this way, we open up new pathways without injuring ourselves, and because the body has ushered us into this new opening, it will undoubtedly be a change that we can integrate into our whole being.

### MOVING INTO STILLNESS

As our work with *asanas* becomes yet more refined, we redirect our awareness to the stillness that is in between, inside, and throughout all movement. This awareness is most readily available when we sit in meditation, hold a posture, or become conscious of the still pause between two breaths. In later stages of practice our awareness of this stillness becomes omnipresent. This experience of stillness within the movement can happen anytime we become completely merged with the movement itself. This is not an experience we can make happen but one that happens through sustained practice and through grace. Eventually, we are not only aware of stillness, we *are* stillness.

If practiced with a conscious awareness of the purpose of Yoga, which is to realize a unitive state, concentrated *asana* practice, the third limb of Ashtanga Yoga, will naturally involve each of the other seven limbs of practice, especially the ten ethical precepts of the *yamas* and *niyamas* (the first two limbs). Through the practice of *asanas* we can learn to be accepting of our limitations (*ahimsa*), truthful in our com-

mitment to do our best (*satya*), and content regardless of the outcome (*santosha*). We can bring our burning enthusiasm and curiosity (*tapas*) to the practice and look deeply at our reactions and responses to difficulty or ease (*swadhyaya*) and ultimately surrender up our practice to something greater than ourselves (*ishvarapranidhana*). When we find our right relationship to the ground, gravity, and space, the breath is experienced as a whole-body phenomenon. When this happens we begin to feel ourselves as conduits for the life force and there is energetic continuity throughout our bodies (*pranayama*, the fourth limb of Yoga). As we delve deeper, the practice of *asana* involves consciously moving into stillness (*pratyahara*, the fifth limb), focusing our attention on one thing at a time (*dharana*, the sixth limb), and sustaining this awareness regardless of what is going on around us (*dhyana*, the seventh limb). When a posture has been perfected, an absolute balance is struck between effort and noneffort, the result of which is a neutralization of all sensation. When this happens the mind returns to original silence (*samadhi*, the eighth limb). There is no one left to do the pose, only the pose itself moving through us.

Coming home to the body through *asana* practice can be a joyous reunion. For many it will feel like seeing a dear friend after many years of absence. For others it will be a reunion fraught with emotion. As the discursive mind moves into the shadows of consciousness, the body is allowed to speak its mind. When we allow ourselves to experience deep bodily relaxation and the revitalization that accompanies such release, we may experience evocative dreams, whirlwind emotions, and insights that compel action. As a result of these newfound insights we may decide to make changes in our life. Perhaps we decide to change our diet, leave an unsatisfying job, end an unhealthy relationship (or renew our commitment to a good one), or adopt a lifestyle that more clearly reflects our values. We may decide to begin some creative project that has been on the back burner all our lives. In essence, we begin to lead a life that is governed as much by the dictates of the heart and guts as by the rationale of the mind.



We may find that we now have an entirely different navigational system through which to steer our lives. Not only do we have the useful compass of the rational mind, we have the sensate and responsive apparatus of our body to alert us to the subtlest of changes. We start to know what we are feeling and to let our actions be informed by those feelings. We become aware of the first signs of illness and through early intervention have a better chance of preventing full-blown disease. We start to trust that the body has a particular kind of wisdom that we can tune in to if we have the humility to listen. And we start to take into account our bodily wisdom *especially* when it is not congruent with our best-laid plans and to reassess the wisdom of those plans.

While embodied awareness is an integral part of the yogic tradition, yogis have always warned that we should not mistake the map for the territory. We do indeed have a body, but don't make the mistake of thinking that you are *only* your body. From an absolute viewpoint, that which is eternal in us is not the body, but that which is eternal lives *through* the body. If we fail to make this distinction, we will become distraught when our bodies inevitably age or when, through sickness, we are unable to do what was previously possible. There is a beautiful series of affirmations in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that teaches us how to make this distinction:

A wife loves her husband not for his own sake, . . . but because the Self lives in him.  
 A husband loves his wife not for her own sake, . . . but because the Self lives in her.  
 Children are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.  
 Wealth is loved not for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it.

The universe is loved not for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it.

The gods are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.

Creatures are loved not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them.

Everything is loved not for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it.<sup>4</sup>

We might easily add a verse that says:

The body is not loved for its own sake, but because the Self lives in it.

Yogis were eminently aware of the conundrum of practicing a dispassion toward the body while at the same time recognizing it as the temporary abode of a divine Self. More to the point: Where else but the body *can* we experience consciousness? As Patanjali so clearly lays out in his exposition on the means of attaining a realization of this Self, we have to go through the body; we cannot go around it. And thus, unlike so many traditions that have viewed the body as something to be transcended, the Yoga tradition tells us to make the house of the body a fit place to live.

In recent times the practice of *asana* or hatha yoga has become synonymous with the practice of Yoga. This is unfortunate. The perfection of *asanas* was never meant as the goal of Yoga practice, nor will standing on our head for an hour signal some major achievement on our spiritual path. This misconception is understandable given our obsession with form and our desire to have some kind of concrete evidence of attainment. Traditionally, *asana* practice was only one small sliver of Yoga, yet it was considered a crucial part of practice. Designed to make the body strong yet flexible, alert yet relaxed, the postures gradually fine-tune the body. This fine-tuning calibrates the nervous system so that our senses become extremely discerning. This preparation was considered paramount for beginning the rigors of meditation. It was also recognized that to do such practices as well as

to fulfill our duties in the world would take enormous energy, energy that would not be available if we suffered ill health or disease. In this regard the practice of hatha yoga was intended to serve this greater purpose. These practical benefits are of no small consequence. They can make the difference between being able to fulfill our purpose in life or not. Taken out of the larger philosophical context of Yoga as a life practice, however, the *asanas* become nothing more than a glorified stretching regimen.

The point of practicing *asanas* is to become sensitive, attuned, and adaptable. Whether we attain great gymnastic abilities becomes entirely inconsequential in the context of Yoga as a life practice. If we become enamored with the performance of advanced postures and fix our identity on these achievements, we have simply replaced one false identity with another. Many students new to Yoga also make this mistake when choosing a teacher, judging the teacher's qualifications purely through the evidence of his or her ability to do difficult movements. When we realize that what we are advancing toward is not some physical form but an inward recognition of the truth of who we are, then we will not feel ourselves to be failing if we cannot attain difficult postures. *"Advanced" practice is any movement that brings us closer to this recognition of our true self.*

When we keep this larger purpose in mind, the simplest physical practice becomes richly imbued with meaning. We can take great delight in opening the fingers of our hand, in feeling the soles of our feet on the ground, or in the sensation of lightness that comes when we stand erect. Then the body becomes a sacred sanctuary in which that which is worshiped, the worshiper, and the place of worship merge into One.

This oneness is indeed the meaning of the word *Yoga* and is its goal. In following the eight-limb path of Ashtanga Yoga, we have considered the overriding importance of the ten ethical precepts, the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and the way in which our relationships with others accurately reflect our cognition of this unity. We have also looked at the need to discipline our awareness and actions so that we can har-

ness our energies toward this goal. In *asana* practice we embody these understandings, taking them directly into our tissue, bones, and blood so that we experience this unity intimately through our form. The next limb of Ashtanga Yoga, *pranayama*, gives us a practical tool that is always available to us: our breath. Our breath, like our heartbeat, is the most reliable rhythm in our lives. When we become attuned to this constant rhythm, our breath can gradually teach us to come back to the original silence of the mind.