

Begin right now.
It just makes sense

EMBODIED PRESENCE
A Spiritual Memoir

by
Terry Ray

Embodied Presence: A Spiritual Memoir

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PREFACE

In June 2013, I was hiking a mountain trail, lost in reflection when I emerged from a forest of pine trees into a campground. Two boys, about 8 years old, in cut off jean shorts and bright-colored T-shirts, zipped past me on scooters. One boy with a dark complexion and curly hair, grinned broadly at his friend challenging him, “Let’s race!”

The second boy, fair and blond, leaned in accepting the challenge. His jaw clenched, he looked determined.

The boy with the dark curly hair pushed the ground fully and effortlessly. His beaming smile and uninhibited movements exuded: “School is out and I am free, free to feel the wind in my face, free to feel the elation in my body, free to push this scooter as fast as I can!” Every muscle engaged energetically as he sped ahead.

He threw his head back and laughed out loud in pure delight as his scooter rounded the bend flying past me around the circle to join his slower friend.

Something long-buried in me stirred, and a smile slowly grew inside my belly as I watched and resonated with this vitality. I remembered my own innocence, enthusiasm, wonder and awe as a child. The freedom I perceived in this young boy’s all-out, fully embodied participation resonated with a lifetime of my own personal moments that were absolutely full and complete.

At the time of that hike in the mountains, I had been practicing and teaching both Sensory Awareness and Insight Meditation in workshops, classes and retreats for

almost forty years. Each path had lead me to more complete engagement in life. Both were mindfulness practices pointing to waking up yet they differed in form as well as focus.

Sensory Awareness is based on becoming more wakeful through the five sense doors. It is unstructured, often interactive, and there are no teachings or dogma other than one's own direct experience. It leads to awakening through embodiment, generating full engagement in life. Insight Meditation involves fixed periods of individual silent sitting or walking practice, turning inward, strengthening the power of concentration, and bringing attention to everything that arises in mind as well as body. It includes the teachings and knowledge of the ages.

Embodied Presence: A Spiritual Memoir comes from the intersection of these two parallel lifelong paths, both of them pointing to awakening. Each brings a deep experiential investigative presence. Together they encompass the expansive freedom and playfulness we all had as children and the depth and wisdom of the elders. Hopefully you will read and enjoy it and the suggested practices will point you to your own unique direction to more life and vitality.



ABOUT THE PRACTICES

The only way to understand Sensory Awareness or meditation is to practice them over time.

The words I suggest in guided meditations may not fit for you. You are encouraged to use whatever words are the most beneficial.

Sensory Awareness involves simple basic mindfulness practices, called experiments rather than exercises because it is a process of exploration. The instructions are to pay close attention to ordinary activities, bringing mindful investigation into simple tasks; let your arm come up, tap your legs, find out what happens when you put one hand on the top of your head, yet they lead us to the raw simplicity of now. Even though we may have done the same activity hundreds of times, we dive in fresh each time.

In both Sensing and Insight Meditation there is no 'correct' way, no 'right' or 'wrong' results, just discoveries. What happens, happens. Learning comes from within.

Charlotte Selver taught the importance of cultivating three things. These are also the basis of Insight Meditation; the willingness to let things be as they are, the willingness to allow them to change, and a great deal of love.



Both practices include;

- ◉ The intention is to meet ourselves where we are rather than attempting to fix or change anything.
- ◉ A curious attitude. (Even when that means bringing curiosity to indifference).
- ◉ Even our unwillingness to pause and take the time to practice can be useful information.

In Sensing;

- ◉ Questions are not to be answered, but are designed to point to a non-verbal somatic experience, simply hearing, seeing, tasting, touching and smelling.
- ◉ Feeling nothing is not inferior to noticing a sensation. Be willing to feel nothing.
- ◉ Small sensations are very important. Attune to the more subtle impressions, changes and movements.
- ◉ Over-efforting or becoming too serious doesn't help. Playfulness is welcome. Life may just be waiting for us to get on our scooters and fly.



My teachers' words landed in me like seeds that have sprouted and have born delicious fruit. My hope is that you will harvest the teachings and that they will germinate, grow, blossom and bear sweet fruit in you as well.

CHAPTER I

FIRST STEPS ON THE PATH

*Within this fathom long body is found all of the
teachings, is found suffering, the cause of suffering,
and the end of suffering.*

The Buddha

The sidewalk in Houston, Texas, was already hot that morning. It was Saturday and I was headed to the Yoga School for my weekly class. Yoga was still little known in most of the U.S. in the early '70s, but a school had opened close to our home, and it was changing my life. Suzy, the teenager across the street, was babysitting the children, while my husband Larry, who had just finished law school, was studying for the Texas State Bar Exam. For the past six months, this had been our weekend routine.

That morning had started off like most. From somewhere deeply immersed in the world of sleep, I heard a whimper, "Mommy, I'm hungry." I opened my eyes and my son's face came into focus. I glanced at the window. It was still dark. I lumbered into the kitchen and got out the oatmeal and bananas. Then I heard a piercing screech and turned to my daughter's room. One whiff revealed that her

diaper needed changing. After she was settled back in, I crawled back under the sheets next to my husband, praying for a few more minutes without crises or demands. As I was drifting off I remembered, *Oh, it's Saturday. Yoga class.* As I enjoyed the last few minutes of cozy bliss, I thought back to January and how I first discovered yoga.

One day Larry had walked in the door, screen slamming behind him. I was on my hands and knees on the floor, playing “horsie” with our little girl, Shannon, on my back. He threw his brown leather jacket over the back of the couch, kicked off his shoes, and picked up his daughter. He swung her around to her shrieking glee, placed her on his shoulders, and remarked to me that a friend from school had told him about a new kind of fitness program that he wanted me to try out with him. It was called “yoga.” Feeling pleased that he’d thought of something we could do together, I walked over to the phone and dialed Suzy. “Would you be able to babysit Saturday mornings?” She eagerly agreed, “Yes! I need the money, and I’m dying to get out of my house.” And Larry and I signed up for the Saturday morning yoga class.

I liked it. My hamstrings became flexible. I enjoyed standing on my head. At home Shannon and her big brother Oliver tried to copy the headstand, rolling over in fits of giggles. After a month, Larry dropped out. It was taking too much time from his studies, so I attended classes alone. As I practiced the poses and movements, my body became more animated and some hidden places in me began stirring.

A few months later my whole life turned upside down.

Up to that point, my previous five years had been a blur of wet diapers, macaroni and cheese, and pasty matter

on high chairs. I spent my hours washing dishes, clothes, soiled bottoms, and snotty noses. The high points of the day were checking the paper and finding out that apple juice was on sale at the supermarket and then Larry's arrival home with a treat in his pocket for the children and often flowers for me. I had a few casual women friends, but I wasn't as interested in shopping, gossiping, and many of the activities and pastimes they seemed to enjoy. Except for adoring my children, I wasn't feeling enthusiastic about anything. Even the persistent struggle of my younger years to "do something and get somewhere" was now a kind of vague memory.

That particular morning on the way to yoga class, I'd been talking to God, in one of my silent monologues—not unusual for me. I had been talking to "Him" as long as I could remember. But this time the conversation took a different turn. God talked back.

I had been carefully stepping over each of the lines scored in the cement sidewalk, aware of my increasing frustration with what seemed a lot like a one-sided relationship. I was fed up, so I'd put it out there, with no apology for my tone of irritation: *Do you really exist, or am I making you up?*

Of course I exist! came the immediate answer. It was not spoken in a way I heard with my ears, but it was, without a doubt, loud and clear. And it seemed perfectly natural. So natural, in fact, that I continued in the same line of questioning. *But how can I know for sure?*

Whatever *It* was—a voice or some presence—just smiled. Of course I couldn't actually see the smile, but I knew that smiling was happening. This was the most gentle, loving, all-encompassing smile that I could imagine, and it

was in me and in everything all around me. Furthermore, whatever it was that was smiling knew everything there was to know about me, much deeper than I knew myself. And I was not only seen, I was absolutely one hundred

I was absolutely one hundred percent loved and accepted by this Presence that I somehow knew was as vast as the world.

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In that instant, I was jolted out of my trance. *I had been answered.* In that very same moment, *It* vanished, and my

mind simply stopped. What had happened was so startling that I could not begin to make sense of it. I had no context for an experience like this. The only God I'd known about had been the one in Sunday school. But *that* God was up *there* and only spoke to Moses and a few other prophets. I didn't think I was the kind of person God would want to talk to. Still, I knew I had been heard or witnessed by *Something*.

My heart opened with joy. Life before this moment had felt flat, gray, and monotone. And now suddenly it was an electric three-dimensional symphony of brilliant colors—everything vibrant and exhilarating. There is little I could say about the experience that wouldn't diminish it. The world was the same, but the way I had characteris-

This all-encompassing, wakeful Presence permeated everything: trees, the breeze, and everyone—including me.

tically fathomed life had been replaced in that moment by a new way of perceiving. It was clear to me that this all-encompassing, wakeful *Presence* permeated everything: trees, the breeze, and everyone—in-

cluding me. I was awed by this sense of interconnectedness. I felt expansive and complete in a way I would never have imagined possible. My heart felt full, to the point of bursting. There was nothing to fear. *There was nothing to fear. I was trust itself.* I was trust itself, and I felt sure this delight and joy would never leave me.

Because I didn't have any frame of reference for understanding what had transpired, I didn't talk about it. I didn't tell anyone. Talking to God could be chalked up as some kind of prayer, but God talking back seemed more like lockup material. Only after about fifteen years did I finally confess it to my trusted therapist.

Besides, I didn't need to talk about it. I was in a state of bliss. The lifelong struggle and discomfort I had carried inside me had stopped. I had arrived. I didn't need anybody or anything; I was full and complete. I had risen above all pain and sorrow, and there would be only pleasure from now on. I had made it to happily-ever-after. The world was only love and light, and that was here to stay, forever. It was a dream beyond any I could have hoped for, a love that couldn't betray me. I had been reunited with my essential nature: the Beloved.

Nothing had changed, and everything had changed. My days were still filled with macaroni and cheese and pasty matter, but now I wasn't alone—I was part of something bigger.

This was the first thing that happened.



PRACTICE

WHAT DO YOU FEEL?

Consider approaching this investigation with no preconceptions, not knowing what might happen. Be open to the possibility that something new might arise for you.

- ◉ Lightly run the tips of your fingers over the surface of the page or screen you are reading this on. Do your fingers sense the temperature, texture, hardness or softness?
- ◉ Imagine that you are blind and the sense of touch through your fingers is the only way you experience the world.
- ◉ Now take off your shoes, (socks are OK) and become aware of the bottoms of your feet. Slide your feet over whatever they are touching. Can you be as awake in the soles of your feet as you are in your hands? Imagine reading Braille with the bottoms of your feet. Can the nerves in the soles of your feet be sensitive enough to differentiate the letters?

A month after my talk with God, I was still floating on love, mystery, and magic. Saturday mornings I arrived for yoga, opened the door of the big white house where classes were held, and entered the large comfortable entry hall. But one morning something there was different—on the table next to the soft blue couch was a square book with a royal blue cover. *Be Here Now*, written by someone named Ram Dass. During the class my mind kept drifting back to that square blue cover on the hall table. As soon as I could, I made my way back to it. I sank into the couch and, riveted by what I was reading, sat absorbed through lunch. The pages were grocery-bag brown, and as I turned them my life course turned as well.

Superimposed over images of Eastern icons, Hindu and Tibetan gods and gurus, Christian and Jewish symbols were Ram Dass's words about love, a kind that didn't want or need anything. "Eternal love," "divine essence," "unbearable compassion" flowed through the pages, and then a term I had never heard, "cosmic consciousness." Ram Dass explained, "We all are a part of infinite time and space." Over and over he reminded, "Remember. Remember who you really are."

Something inside me began to stir to life. I felt like I had been living alone in a foreign country where no one spoke my language, and here was someone speaking words I could understand and that made sense. Ram Dass was inviting me into a new and unexplored territory that was deep and meaningful. The reality I had been living in was only one of many. I was stunned.

As I read, I felt I was recalling something that I couldn't quite put my finger on. It began to emerge as a sense of some distant, long-forgotten place that was home—more

home than the house in which I had grown up, more home even than the place I now lived with my husband and children—a real home that was timeless, basic and utterly safe. It was as though I had been cramped inside a small, oppressive room, breathing stale air for eons, and all at once a window had been opened. Sweet fresh air flowed in, and I could see out into a breathtaking world filled with rose blossoms, redwood trees, snowcapped mountains and sparkling oceans. Inside of me, an uncharted interior space opened. *Be Here Now* was my aperture to truth.

I walked home from class that morning filled with myriad questions. Deep longings were stirring. I was ravenous for more.

We all come to our awakening in different ways. For some, it happens in childhood. For others, it might be the result of an accident or an illness. For me, these two experiences on the heels of each other utterly changed my life and set me on a new path. I didn't know where this path was taking me but I was intrigued and felt compelled to follow it. Something, some deep intuition that knew there was more, had drawn me out of my stay-at-home-mom malaise and led me to that yoga class. I have Larry to thank for introducing me to what he'd thought was "a new kind of fitness program." Maybe he too knew I needed something more.

From that point on, my life shifted direction. I still changed diapers and ironed, but daytime television dropped away, and daily I scanned my own copy of *Be Here Now*, continually amazed that there was someone who not only understood but could articulate passions and longings buried inside me. There would be no going back.

PRACTICE

FINDING OUT

Practice the following either while sitting, standing or lying down.

- ◉ Let your hands come up to gently touch both sides of your head. How much space is there in between your hands?
- ◉ Can you discern anything in this space?
- ◉ Explore your skull with your hands.
- ◉ Stop now and tap your head. Tap for a half to one minute then stop.
- ◉ How subtly and accurately can you track changing sensations? Try this out for a minute.
- ◉ How is the touch received?
- ◉ Does anything respond in breathing?

“How can you just leave Larry and a babysitter to handle things and take care of your kids while you go off to some weird spiritual thing?” Friends were horrified. “What if this is a cult? What if this teacher is crazy?” A week after reading Ram Dass’s book, I’d seen a flyer on the bulletin board at the yoga school. Ram Dass himself would be teaching a course in Boulder, Colorado, that summer, at a place called Naropa Institute. I had to go. I had never before taken a trip alone. Even the thought of being alone made me cringe. None of it mattered. I loved my family dearly, but I felt like I had been living a superficial, phony

existence all my life. For the first time something *real* was offering itself. Larry was surprised at first but then seemed to understand, and Suzy across the street was on summer vacation and needed the job. I was on my way.

That summer of 1974 at Naropa, the door of that stuffy little room I'd kept myself in opened wide. I stepped over the threshold into the living, breathing world. I had been asleep and had just awakened. I hungered for everything. I hungered for learning and for living. I was starving, and Naropa spread out before me a buffet of mouthwatering dishes—meditation, tai chi, Sensory Awareness, yoga, and Ram Dass, who would be teaching a course on the *Bhagavad Gita*, part of the Hindu Epic Scriptures.

Classes at Naropa were held in a sizeable warehouse. It was packed that first evening when Ram Dass was scheduled to talk. Hundreds of us, sitting on the floor, chanted as we waited for him to arrive. He entered in flowing robes, a tall man with a mustache, full beard and long curly hair. His sparkling eyes promised a wonderful sense of humor. As he spoke, questions I didn't even realize I harbored were answered. He somehow understood the tangle of my mind, always busy, always doing. He showed me that there were other ways to live. He spoke about the importance of silence. Seeds that had lain dormant and hidden deep in the recesses of my psyche began to sprout. I was coming home.

And that was just the beginning of the delectable treats. I heard that a man named Joseph Goldstein was teaching a course on Vipassana, Insight Meditation, every afternoon. It sounded interesting, so I decided to attend. Joseph was tall and lanky; his voice was clear and resonant.

He wasn't like anyone I had ever met, and he said things I'd never heard before. "Everyone suffers in life," he said in the first class. I found this idea strangely liberating. My own experience had certainly revealed that life's bowl of cherries had pits. It was a relief to learn that I had not made a mistake or done something wrong, that everyone else suffers too, that it's a part of existence. And Joseph was teaching us that nonjudgmental awareness could free us from suffering.

But it was Joseph's presence perhaps more than what he spoke of that affected me most and led me to the path of Insight Meditation. There was something different and compelling about him. I couldn't name it, but I knew I wanted what he embodied. Later, I realized that what drew me was not what he *had* but what he didn't have. There was a spaciousness in him, and it awakened an innermost space in me that also felt like home.

I had no idea, however, that home could also mean arriving right where I was—in my own body. Another of the classes I enrolled in was entitled "Waking up the Sense Doors," based on the Sensory Awareness work of a German woman named Charlotte Selver. One of her students, Ben Weaver, was teaching it. As I worked with him, I began to realize that Insight Meditation and Sensory Awareness were both pointing to the same thing but in slightly different ways—they were waking me up to embodied presence.

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Ben's classes took place outside in a park adjacent to Boulder Creek. Each day he guided us through what he

called “experiments.” They seemed a lot like playing but revealed attitudes, assumptions and ways of being that were unconscious but deeply affecting our lives. In one experiment we silently walked with a random partner, holding hands, one person leading while the other followed blindfolded. I was surprised that I could not relax and trust my partner; I kept trying to see and protect myself. But instead of making that wrong, Ben encouraged us to observe and allow what we felt, without judgment.

The last day of the class smelled like sunshine and pine trees. In the distance the whirl of a lawnmower kept growing louder and then fading. I could imagine it moving along its neat continuous rows. I took off my sweater, glad I had worn a light tank top underneath. Ben asked us to lie down on our backs and notice what we were feeling in our bodies. That was the typical way we had been starting class all week. I felt dreamy and contented, resting on my back, looking up at the clouds, smelling fresh cut grass. After a few minutes I was surprised to notice a knot in my esophagus.

“There is a lump in my throat,” I said, loud enough for everyone to hear, as we had been instructed.

“Good!” Ben replied. “Pay close attention to the sensation.”

As I followed his instructions, I began to realize that this constriction in my throat had been present there for as long as I could remember. As I paid attention, the tightness grew and amplified. Then, quite unexpectedly, the discomfort turned into tears, pouring out in a seemingly endless river, as a lifetime of loneliness and isolation found its way to the surface.

I'd grown up around alcohol, parental affairs, and elephants in the room. No one else could see the elephants, but their droppings were everywhere. Mom screamed at us, or busied herself with a fashion crisis. In spite of her five feet of height, Mother's presence filled the room. She saw to it that wherever she was, she attracted all of the attention. Her voice could easily be heard in the next room, and she had a knack for turning every conversation back to herself. Dad was gone a lot. My brother was mean, and my sister, simply lost.

I used to play in Mom's sizeable dressing room, gazing up at her from the floor while she studied herself in the full-length mirrors covering all four walls and doors. I'd play with my own small reflections, bouncing back and forth to infinity. I longed for my mother, longed for her to hold me, to pay attention to me, to play with me.

I remember thinking if I could give her something special, then she'd love me. Mom was a smoker, and I'd heard her say one day that she needed an ashtray in the kitchen. We were sculpting clay in kindergarten, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. The teacher fired my blue clay ashtray to harden it, and I pasted a sticker of a butterfly on the bottom. I would give it to Mom as a surprise. She would be so happy. I was thrilled. I brought it home wrapped in tissues so no one could see it.

As soon as I got in the door, I flew up the stairs to her dressing room.

"Mommeeeee, I made you something. It's a surprise!"

She was leaning forward over the sink to get closer to one of the mirrors, her lips stretched out in a big "O," carefully applying bright crimson lipstick. I shook her arm to

get her attention. The red went outside the lines. Eyebrows knit, she glowered at me.

“Look what you’ve done,” she said sternly. “You’ve messed up my make-up.”

“But I made you something really good.” I stomped my foot when I said “good” to let her know how wonderful it was.

“Can’t you see I’m busy?” she said, her voice loud and rough. “Go play somewhere else.”

Maybe she didn’t understand what I was saying. I tried again. “But Mommy, you really want this.”

She grabbed the package from me and shouted. “I mean it! Leave me alone!”

I sulked back to my room, crushed. After she had left the house, I crept back into her dressing room and found the blue ashtray in the trashcan. It was broken in two pieces. One butterfly wing was on one side of the can; the other was upside down across from it. I clenched my jaw to stop the overwhelming pain filling my throat. Looking into the mirror’s infinite reflections, through grinding teeth, I shouted, “I hate her.”

Lying on my back on the grass that warm summer day at Naropa, I realized that the dense contraction in my throat had been there since that day in my mother’s dressing room. The tightness had protected me from feeling the desperate need I’d had for my mother, for her caring, for her love. As I allowed the squeezing and contractions to just be there, feeling the muscles that were unconsciously creating the tightness, my throat loosened spontaneously.

Meeting the tightening in my throat unearthed a hidden longing. I realized that when I shut out Mom, I shut out love itself. As a child I had looked to her to be love’s

emissary. As an adult I was just beginning to realize that the love and connection I craved was inside me. I could access my own heart, as the poet Rumi said, by finding all the barriers within myself I had built against love. Bringing conscious attention to sensations as they arose in my body exposed those barriers. I was beginning to understand a quote Ben had read from the Buddha: “There is one thing that when cultivated and regularly practiced leads to deep spiritual intention, to peace, to mindfulness and clear comprehension, to vision and knowledge, to a happy life here and now, and to the culmination of wisdom and awakening. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness centered on the body.”

I had seen the amazing wisdom and intelligence of my body in the pregnancy and birth of each of my children. My body had known how to grow another being into existence. It knew when it was time to go into labor and launch my children into the world. What is this intelligence? What genius heals our wounds and circulates our blood? What causes our lungs to breathe and our heart to beat? What is the life that runs through us? Answering these questions by being present in my own body would become my life’s passion and would lead me to understand how the stories of the past that were imprisoned in my very muscles, tissues, organs, and throughout my body could be released.

When the Sensory Awareness class ended that day, I approached Ben and told him I’d realized how the tightness in my throat was linked to pain in my childhood. He replied, “That’s an important discovery. If you are interested in pursuing this work, go study with my teacher, Charlotte Selver.” He handed me a flyer and added some

advice: “You’d better go soon though. She’s quite old and probably won’t be around much longer.” His words propelled me forward on my journey, though as it turned out, Charlotte would continue to live and teach for 28 more years, and I would study and walk this path with her, diving always deeper into this mysterious process of waking up.



CHAPTER 2

BECOMING EMBODIED

How difficult it is not to put the sign in place of the thing: how difficult to keep the being always livingly before one and not to slay it with the word.

Goethe

For six dark and tedious hours, the bus jostled along narrow dirt roads over the Sierra Madre mountain range. I must have finally fallen asleep, because I was jolted awake when we came to a stop. Where was I? The driver lumbered heavily down the aisle toward me and announced flatly, “Barra de Navidad.” Oh, Mexico. Charlotte Selver’s workshop. In a blur, I grabbed my backpack and disembarked, alone and into the middle of seemingly nowhere. It was 3:00 a.m.

I was still being carried along by that extraordinary sense of wonder and connection with the living world, including the world inside myself, which had started that remarkable morning on my walk to yoga class. But even though I knew my life was being held in a greater ocean of trust and safety, I wasn’t immune to fear. In this totally unknown place in the middle of a dark night, I hoped that the Living Presence I felt around me could hold me safe.

The “bus station” turned out to be an outdoor restaurant with a thatched roof. It had a cement floor and no walls. A few unpainted wooden tables held chairs turned upside down on them. One bare light bulb hung from the ceiling. Everything beyond the light bulb’s limited reach was black. No one was around. Somewhere a dog barked. A rooster answered. Anxious and not knowing what to do next, I sat on a low cement wall near the meager circle of light. The brochure had said that the workshop would take place in Barra de Navidad, and I’d assumed that where to go on arrival would be obvious. It wasn’t—at least not in the middle of the night. I’d been so eager to pursue new discoveries that more carefully checking out the terrain ahead of time hadn’t occurred to me. And now, tired and confused, I was beginning to wonder why I’d decided to leave behind everything familiar.

After sitting there worrying for a while, my anxious mental chatter began to subside and I was able to start paying attention to where I actually was. To my surprise, I could hear the sound of waves and realized that I was near the ocean. I hoisted my pack and headed toward it. The moon was barely a sliver but enough to reveal a sandy beach and the shimmering tips of incoming waves. I collapsed with exhaustion, pushed my backpack under my head, burrowed my hips into the sand, and slept dreamlessly until roosters started crowing, and the small village began to awaken and come to life.

I shook the sand off my pack and clothes and out of my hair, and ventured into the cobblestone streets of town. The shops were still shuttered. I stopped to read a poster nailed on the door of one of the hotels. Ah, the location of the Sensory Awareness workshop! It said the program was

scheduled to begin that afternoon at 4:00. Until then, I'd be on my own.

A few doors farther down a heavy-set woman was cranking open a noisy steel shutter. A juice bar. I sat down and pointed to the oranges. Sipping a tall glass of sweet fresh juice, I dug into my bag for the crumpled sheet of paper with information about the workshop. We were to find our own lodging for the next two weeks. I finished the juice and set out to look for a room. On a nearby building a sign was posted for a rental. I knocked, and the woman who answered showed me a modest room with a small high window, a single springy bed with sheets that were a little too short and no blanket, and a small wooden table with peeling red paint. Here, too, a single light bulb dangled from the ceiling. The space smelled clean and fresh and opened onto a small, enclosed courtyard with a cement sink and a propane cooker. My new home.

With hours left to go, I wandered through the village, past houses with cement walls, thatched roofs and earthen floors. Coconut palms and papaya trees sprouted out of bare dirt yards. Women swept the ground as children ran barefoot over dusty cobblestones, carrying younger siblings. Horses clopped down the main street, men and boys astride, bareback. Around midday, I watched small boats carrying lone men into the lagoon from the open ocean. They disembarked holding strings of dangling fish. Laid out on the dock, the fish twisted and jerked, flinging their shining silver bodies up and flopping heavily back down onto the wooden planks.

A few minutes before four o'clock, I climbed three flights of stairs to the roof of the building indicated in the poster. I took a seat on a straw mat in the open air, along-

side nineteen other students. The door opened and a little old lady appeared. Charlotte Selver. My next awakening was about to begin.



It was not love at first sight. It wasn't even close. The classes were strange. I kept waiting for her to explain what we were doing, and all she would say, in her thick German accent, were things like, "Do you feel your feet?" and "How is breathing?" To which I would silently reply, *"Do you feel your feet?"* "How is breathing now?" *course I feel my feet, and what do you mean, how is breathing? And where's this all going anyway?* I put up with this for over a week, obediently doing the experiments in class but mostly looking forward to tostadas for lunch and going to the beach.

Then it happened. One afternoon, about ten days into the workshop, I was in my room washing dishes when, for the first time ever, I clearly heard the soundtrack of my own self-critical voice. I immediately recognized it as the background noise that had accompanied my entire life. The tone was bitter and filled with a deep-seated self-hatred that had been—and still was—affecting everything I did and felt. As I stood at the washstand, I noticed my thighs squeezing tight, as if in self-defense. My fingers were grabbing the plate I was washing with excessive effort. As I walked across the room, each footstep struck the floor with too much force. I heard the hostility as coarseness in my voice. Self-loathing informed most of my thoughts. It was lodged in my musculature and in my breath. This shocking insight was so powerful and pervasive that it wasn't even unpleasant. My

response was more like, *Wow! This is the truth!*

Suddenly everything Charlotte had been saying made sense. She was pointing us to the simple somatic experience beneath words and thoughts. For the next two and a half days, I lived with this awareness, hour by hour recognizing that I had never valued gentleness or believed that loving tenderness was possible. I saw clearly how I had concluded that I had to be tough to survive. Bits of memories that had been buried in my body began to surface: The image of a tall woman with cinnamon-colored skin, sitting on the side of my bed looking down at me with sorrowful eyes, quietly saying, “I will not be coming back.” The feeling of her long arms wrapped around me as I sat in her lap, crying inconsolably with aching sadness. My grandfather’s soft, loving gaze, which flooded my chest with warmth. My dog, Pepper. When a girl in third grade said she didn’t want to be friends with me, Pepper lovingly licked my tears and face, *saying* he would be friends with me forever, no matter what.

As I relived these memories, my trapezius muscles, which I hadn’t noticed as tense, released, and my shoulders found a new place, naturally dropping down and moving back. My chest opened from the inside, and a wonderful feeling of both dignity and tenderness began to emerge. I could perceive my own gentleness. This was utterly unprecedented. I felt fresh, alive—and embodied. I was in me, feeling the breath move through me. And for the first time that I could remember, compassion began to arise. When I felt it in myself, I knew that this warmhearted place of altruistic caring and love exists in every one of us, buried beneath our armored exteriors. When we allow ourselves to feel the wounds we carry in our bodies, that inherent compassion can be freed.

PRACTICE

FEELING WHAT IS NOW

Come up to standing.

- ◉ Notice yourself as mass and weight.
- ◉ Notice the touch of your clothes.
- ◉ Notice the touch of air on the part of your skin that is exposed.
- ◉ Notice that you are naked underneath your clothes.
- ◉ What do you feel inside your skin?
- ◉ Do you feel any tightness in your shoulders?
- ◉ Can you feel your lungs breathing?
- ◉ Let your hands come up gently to touch both sides of your head. How much space is there in between your hands?
- ◉ Can you discern anything in this space?
- ◉ Explore your skull with your hands.
- ◉ Stop now and tap your head. Tap for a half to one minute then stop.
- ◉ Try this out for a little while, tracking changing sensations?
- ◉ Does anything respond in breathing?

As children, we all start out feeling love and compassion for what we meet in life. When Khloe, my little granddaughter, comes to visit, she is innately radiant, loving all of life and eager to give. Khloe loves my chickens so much

that she has decided to give them “chicken massages.” The chickens aren’t sure they want chicken massages, but they do tolerate her enthusiasm to care for them. If as children we didn’t have the kind of loving context that surrounds Khloe, encouraging and supporting her natural sense of openness and love, we may have buried those feelings deep inside our bodies. We may have shielded ourselves from pain by tightening our muscles, lifting our shoulders, or locking our jaw, and those defense systems stay in place long after the original painful events have passed. But love and compassion were still there inside us naturally, and they are there now, waiting always to be released. When I first heard Ram Dass say, “Remember who you are,” I knew he was referring to a spiritual principle. However, as I learned to pay attention to my own body, I began to realize that remembering who I am also means returning to the natural kindness and gentleness that is hidden under a tough façade.

Remembering who I am also means returning to the natural kindness and gentleness that is hidden under my tough façade.

I find now that when my heart closes and grows hard, I might first notice that my tone of voice and attitude have become harsh. I feel callous. My first tendency is to look outside myself for the compassion I need. When instead I pause to be aware of what is happening in my body, the very turning inward begins to set me toward relief. I might notice that my lips are pressed tightly together trying to ignore a certain distress; my thighs might feel rock-like, squeezing firmly in an attempt to protect me from recognizing how worn down I am; maybe my shoulders are hunching as I try to ignore a persistent headache. As the

muscular constrictions begin to relax in response to my caring presence, the fluid movement of love and compassion inside me arises. I have stopped blocking their natural flow.

In Barra de Navidad I awakened to the truth of my habitual self-hatred. This allowed the wonder and trust that had set me on this path to further deepen and expand. I was realizing there were secrets in my own tissues, muscles, patterns of movement—in fact my whole organism. They would unravel and reveal themselves as I woke up and sensed the life inside my own animal flesh. That workshop was the first of many I would take with Charlotte Selver.



“Come up to standing.” Charlotte’s voice was soft and authoritative. We all immediately rose from where we were sitting on the ground. We were in a Sensory Awareness workshop on Monhegan Island in Maine. By this time I had learned to trust that Charlotte’s “experiments” would lead me to some new discovery. So when she quietly said, “Sit down,” I promptly responded. Then she asked, “Would you please come up to standing?” We moved from sitting to standing and back again eight times, each time following Charlotte’s instructions to closely observe the sensations in our movements. When the experiment was over, I reported with surprise, “My body feels much lighter now!” Charlotte frowned and said adamantly, “It is not your body. It is you!”

What was she talking about? What was the difference? I knew that Charlotte demanded precision from us in our use of language when we reported to her in class. She said it was a way for us to clarify our perceptions of experience.

But why did it matter so much anyway if I said “my body feels” or “I feel”? A few days later another student was similarly reprimanded in class. When that session was over, I ventured out into a deep wooded area of the island. *Why was this point important enough to elicit Charlotte’s stern Germanic responses?* Lost in contemplating this puzzle, I’d been walking with my head down for about fifteen minutes when I suddenly sensed something different around me. I looked up to see that I had entered a huge room-like glade deep in the woods. Tall spruce trees stretched high up overhead, entwining their branches to form lofty gothic arches. Mosses covered boulders; ferns and wildflowers carpeted the floor. I had arrived in a holy place.

I sat carefully down on a fallen tree trunk and could feel the inner shift happening in my body. My eyebrows had been furrowed in concentration, my head stretched forward in an effort “to understand,” my shoulders pulled inward. My body had walked down the path, but my mind had been far removed from my surroundings. I had not been *here*, awake to the environment. But when I entered this enchanting place in the forest, something in me had already sensed it and begun to soften. It was not only “my body” that was coming to more ease; my mind as well was becoming spacious, my attitude lightening, and all of me shifting. I was arriving where I was, present in a sacred living church, a work of God’s art. The sacred in me recognized the sacred around me. I realized that what I had considered to be “my body” was more than flesh, bones, muscles and ligaments. It was not a static, fixed thing as the words would

*“My body” was
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process, constantly
changing with
circumstances
and environments.*

indicate, but a dynamic living process, constantly changing with circumstances and environments.

That very morning I had read a quote from Goethe: “How difficult it is not to put the sign in place of the thing: how difficult to keep the being always livingly before one and not to slay it with the word.” Sitting in that holy space,

*How difficult it is
not to put the sign
in place of the thing:
how difficult to keep
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livingly before one
and not to slay it
with the word.*

I realized that I am more than language can describe. To say “my body” is to freeze a process in time. Living in relationship to my body as an object removes me from who *I* am and denies the vital experience of embodiment. By releasing the labels and words that day, I was seeing life for the

first time. I understood why Charlotte demanded precision in our use of language—to wake us up from habitual ways of thinking and perceiving that kept us separate from life. In that holy place, I was *living*, interconnected with all of life.



A year and a half after that first awakening on the way to yoga class, Larry and I separated. It was 1975, and it seemed that everything in my life was conspiring to draw me into an utterly new life. Charlotte was offering a nine-month study group in California, and I knew I had to go. I gave up my security as a wife and householder, gathered five-year-old Shannon and seven-year-old Oliver into our Volkswagen van, and began the pilgrimage from Houston, Texas, to Marin County, California. I had barely any money, but I felt safe, with a sense of wellbeing previously unknown in my life.

I enrolled the kids in school, and the next day I drove through a fragrant eucalyptus grove and down the twisting dirt road into the beauty and peace of Green Gulch Farm and Zen Monastery. I found the library and sat down on the thin beige carpet with about thirty other students for our first day of the Sensory Awareness study group. After her introduction to the class, Charlotte turned in my direction, lifted her chin slightly, looked down at me and said, “Terry, you can’t be a part of this program, because you have your children living with you. You will have to leave.” My eyes widened. My mouth opened. I was stunned. *What was I going to do?* I had given up my husband, my house, and my life to come here. And leaving my children was out of the question. I was flabbergasted. *How could this be? Wasn’t this so clearly my path now?* I would later find out that Charlotte felt her program required such rigorous attention that it was best done without the demands of a young family. But even if I had known that, how could it have made any difference? It was too late to turn back.

I spent the night crying in fear and near-despair, then dropped the kids off at school the next morning and, holding my breath, slinked into the back of the room where the group was meeting. I tried to make myself invisible. I’m sure Charlotte saw me, but she ignored my presence. For a few weeks I kept as low a profile as possible, until I became more confident that I was not going to be expelled. In reflection, I think Charlotte recognized how much I needed to learn from her, and she must have respected my perseverance, because she didn’t again ask me to leave.

Like most of the buildings at Green Gulch, the library in which the study group took place was unheated. As the winter months came on, the damp cold from the nearby

ocean seeped through my clothes. Each evening the chill followed me back to our unheated house. Every day I silently grumbled my annoyance. One drizzly, foggy morning as I was walking to class from the van, my arms squeezing my ribcage, tightening my chest against the cold, I suddenly became aware of exactly what I was doing. I was whining. I was resisting. *It's too cold*. At that moment my mind became quiet—quiet enough to notice that something inside of me felt as lifeless and frozen as the way I was holding my body. Was this contraction an attempt to numb myself in order to *not* feel the cold? If I was doing this with the cold, what else was I withdrawing from?

With that realization, the straining and tightening began to ease. As it released, I sensed my skin beginning to tingle. Instead of resisting the cold, I opened to it. Once again I realized I didn't have to slay the experience with a word. Instead I observed the sensation of cold arising in me, and I let myself feel it. Remarkably, I no longer minded it at all. The sensation was not even unpleasant. I actually began to enjoy it.

During the nine months I spent at Green Gulch, I arrived more and more in an embodied quiet, becoming intimate with myself and my experience of life. A subtle form of inner connection that didn't use words or images became apparent. It didn't impart information verbally or intellectually, but it communicated very clearly nonetheless. And I realized that this sense of connection had been communicating with me all along, only I'd rarely listened.

Previously, I'd had a sense of my existence as being in my head, around my eyes or forehead. My thoughts, urgent and vital, had dragged me around, talking so loudly I couldn't hear my deeper intuition. They'd told me what

to do, and wearily I had obliged. My body had felt like something troublesome and inert. In fact, I paid more attention to my car than I did to my body. Any slight change in the hum of the engine would put me on notice; I'd grow alert on hearing even the faintest high-pitched squeal or the motor idling in an offbeat rhythm. On the other hand, I wouldn't pay attention to my body until it hurt so badly I couldn't get away from the pain. Neither did I pay attention to most of the pleasant feelings that arose.

When I first started practicing Sensory Awareness, I'd thought I was feeling, but I was actually *thinking* my experience. I'd hasten to say, "I am hungry" instead of noticing precisely what hunger felt like. In studying with Charlotte, a world of sense perception became apparent. Sensing each moment became the path and the end of the path. Each moment was complete in itself, alive, vibrant and connected.

Sensing each moment became the path and the end of the path.

I was coming home to a more natural, innate way of being that included freshness, vitality, spontaneity, playfulness and warmth. Standing in the shower became ecstatic. The warmth of the sun's rays on my skin on a cold day was a tremendous source of pleasure. I was constantly "in touch" with something that was my experience of being alive. I could feel my fingers and toes from the inside. I could feel my digestion, heartbeat, and the movements of breathing. I lived in relationship to gravity—at least whenever I remembered to be present. I began to listen more deeply to my children. I heard the concern in my daughter's voice when she asked, "When are you coming home?" Then I could reassure her and address her fear as well as answer her question.

I began to experience my body and mind as not independent of each other. Body was permeated with mind, and mind was embodied. Biological existence is not separated from thinking or behavior or personality traits or attitude. Thought and physicality arise together as one integrated whole, and neither exists as a fixed, solid entity. Thoughts affect my flesh and blood, and my body affects mind states, attitudes and thinking. Living from somatic experience, I began to recognize that my body is a living organism, alive and sentient, and that consciousness is fully embodied within it.

I would study with Charlotte Selver until she died at 102 years old, and her work would become a major part of my path and my teaching. I would come to deeply understand, as Pema Chodron puts it, “This very body we have, that’s sitting right here right now, with its aches and its pleasures, is exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, fully alive.”



CHAPTER 3

THE CRASH

*Don't under any circumstances do anything
that takes you out of your body.*

Achaan Buddadassa

For almost two years my days were filled with reverence for life. I lived in awe, communing with the spirit of the trees, rocks and sky. The life force in me merged with the natural world. I was living with the Beloved. In Charlotte's Sensory Awareness work and in my meditation practice, I was on an adventure of discovery, delighting in life's mysteries. The more I learned, the more my appetite for learning increased. Even the challenges and rocky places along the way were held within a deep sense that I was finally living the life I was born for.

Then, during the winter of 1976, I crashed. Just as suddenly as it had started, the mystical high I had been on ended. I was browsing in a bookstore one afternoon and was suddenly struck with pains in my abdomen so intense I couldn't stand up. By comparison, childbirth had been easy. I doubled over, helpless to do anything. A stranger drove me to the hospital. In the ER, an intern ordered me to stop screaming—I'd hardly been aware of making any sound at

all. He said I would have to leave if I didn't quiet down. A nurse inserted an IV, and I slipped into the grace of oblivion.

Within a few days the pain, from what turned out to be a pelvic inflammatory disease, had subsided enough for me to start getting some perspective. I looked around my room—a window with a view of the sky, an overhead fluorescent light, the white sheet separating me from a woman who moaned in her sleep.

The light had gone. I checked my body for the vivid
I was alone again. sensations of life I had become accustomed to. The unthinkable had happened. I felt numb. That extraordinary sacred space of connection and safety that had been my world had disappeared. The light had gone. I was alone again. Life felt as unacceptable and devastating as it had been perfect and holy. I had awakened from a dream and landed abruptly in a hard, cruel world.

I blamed the infection. I blamed the antibiotics they'd given me for the disease. I blamed the doctor. For five years I would do everything I could to get my happiness and delight to come back. I went to the same places in the forest where tree beings had spoken to me; the trees were silent now. Joy had been singing in the gurgling streams, but now the water only flowed. I meditated on the same candles through which I had merged with boundless light, but now I only fell asleep. I prayed, begging my Beloved to come back, but no one was listening. I tried chanting. I went Sufi dancing. I fasted for long periods on spring water. I got high from the fasting, soaring into altered states of consciousness, but as soon as I ate again, I came crashing down. Nothing worked. Everything that had been so perfect was now entirely wrong. There had to be some mistake. I searched and searched for the error but was left feeling trapped and empty-handed.

My shoulders tightened and pressed forward. My breath turned shallow, stopping in my upper chest as I tried to block the feelings of confusion and loss. I squeezed my belly against the truth, contracted my legs, and couldn't feel the ground. My mantra became "It's not right. It's not fair." Only when I had exhausted myself did I begin letting go. With a small ray of hope, I started signing up for some meditation retreats and Sensory Awareness workshops. With gentle encouragement and guidance from my teachers, I slowly began to feel again. But what emerged this time was not bliss. My back went out, and I couldn't move without fiery shooting pain. My legs felt frozen, like unyielding rocks. Consciousness was awakening in my body, but this was definitely not what I wanted to feel.

I grew angry. I felt annoyed with my friends, enraged with my mother, and outraged at life. I was furious with God. I hated myself. Even worse, I believed that if I was this angry, I could never be a spiritual person. And that made me even more furious.

Slowly and painfully, I began accepting the anger rather than fighting against it. Through meditation and paying attention to sensations, I learned to notice the heat in my chest and the pressure in my head when anger arose, and I could just sit with it, not resisting nor fueling it. Slowly the anger morphed into the deep ache of despair and a devastating sense of emptiness over all I had lost—not only those exquisite states of mind but also the conviction that I was free of suffering forever. The desolation and sadness I felt were a heavy weight pressing down on my chest and lungs.

But that loss of hope was the turning point. Hope had kept me stuck in the past and projecting into the future, denying the reality of now. Accepting the present—that

like it or not, *here I am*—was a long, slow process. Accepting actually felt better than holding on, and in that less defended state a little curiosity could begin peeking out.

There were many small moments of release during that long healing process. I began to feel my body open again. I started to sense my arms, legs, toes, belly, head. I felt physical and emotional pain. In one of the Sensory Awareness classes I attended, we were walking slowly around the room when Charlotte asked if we could feel any hesitation in our legs as they moved forward. As my attention shifted in response to her question, I noticed the muscles pulling up in my pelvis with each step I was taking. I could feel how tentative my movements were. Charlotte announced loudly, “In order to take a step, Terry, you have to leave the place you are standing.” She had precisely read how my mental state was manifesting in my body. I had indeed been unwilling to leave behind the past. As I let my pelvis drop and move forward, my lower back released and walking became freer and more pleasant. I was willing to begin moving forward into the unknown future. But that future, I knew, no longer was filled with that numinous, magical experience of daily living in the flowing dance of life.

In another class with Charlotte, I began to put down some of the burden of grief I was carrying at this loss. We were experimenting with large stones, and she asked me to pick up the heaviest one. I reached down and lifted a rock that weighed about 20 lbs. I could feel the strain in my arms and shoulders. Charlotte was asking us if we could allow the weight of the stone to travel through us to the floor. As I worked to hold up both myself and the stone, my arms started getting tired and my legs were tightening

when she popped another surprise: Could we dance with the stone? Dance! I was having a hard enough time finding the stamina to simply hold up the rock. But slowly my feet began to move. Then my arms, head, hips. As I danced, the stone got lighter, my feet felt more firmly in touch with the earth. The weight of the stone became a part of my weight, the earth beneath was supporting us, and movement became remarkably pleasant. Joy arose. When I finally set the stone down, I felt tingly, alive, and released from some of that grief I'd been bearing.

I still carried resentment at having been so abruptly dropped out of my heavenly abode, and that attitude pervaded my life. It was again in working with Charlotte that I began breaking into that resistance, through another of her experiments that I at first found myself resisting. She was sitting on a stool, looking—at seventy-six—like a little girl. Her blue full skirt came down to meet her white socks. Her face was lit up with delight and mischief. Suddenly she directed us with one word: “Laugh!” And she laughed.

I didn't feel like laughing. *What was there to laugh about. I had lost a divine state of grace, and it was not coming back.* She said it again, “Laugh!” and continued laughing. I was reminded of times when I was an adolescent and my parents had guests over, and I would be ordered to put on a smile and be nice, whether I felt like it or not. My annoyance grew. I was not going to laugh on command.

“Laugh!” she insisted a third time. The room around me was filled with laughter, but I was angry. I had come to California to practice with her in order to find my real truth, not to learn to be phony. I left the class feeling frustrated and alone.

That night I woke up around midnight, giggling. Giggling turned to loud full laughter, for no reason whatsoever. It was *all* so funny. At the moment, even my trying to hold onto what was gone seemed funny. From that day onward, I began letting laughter back into my life.

Something that far exceeded anything that I understood was taking place. I was in the middle of a purification process that had to do with integrating the fabulous opening I had known and arriving “back down to earth.” And there was yet another lesson waiting to bring me back—the reality of death. The death I encountered may have seemed small to others, but it affected me deeply, and my awareness of the Ultimate Loss would move me back into life.

My canary, Friend, had lived with me for eleven years. Friend sang a lonely sweet song that often comforted me in difficult moments. But every year during his molting season, Friend stopped singing. Feathers gathered on the bottom of his cage and he seemed listless. As he advanced in age, molting lasted longer and longer, and his song weakened. One year, during my own long challenging time, Friend stopped singing altogether. Then he died. His lifeless yellow feathers weighed next to nothing in my hand.

As I turned my attention to my own body, I sensed the constriction in my shoulders and upper chest. As I allowed these to release, I noticed my lips pressing together tightly. My thighs felt like an impenetrable stone, frozen and stuck. I heard myself say, “No! This tightening, this pulling away, this holding back from life is not acceptable. I need to wake up here. Death will come to me as well, and I won’t live half dead until then.” Gently and with kindness,

I remained in touch with the experience of solidity and immobility. As it started to change, I felt my weight settle down into the support of the floor underneath me. Only then did I notice the heavy burden of grief pressing down on my chest again. I was grieving now not only for the loss of Friend and for the unbearable loss of the Beloved, but finally for the loss of a deep connection with my own mother. That grief was old. Experiencing it was new.

The solid rock feeling in my thighs softened and something emerged that had been locked away long ago—an aspect of myself that was more innocent and vulnerable, softer, more open, yet clear and strong. I felt the sadness and tenderness of heart that is a part of life. That period of invincible joy was really over. The truth that everything changes was clear to me. Friend had grown old and died. It would happen to me. I needed to stop comparing my present experience with those luminous months. I needed to live, now. And I knew that meant diving deeper into my sensory experience.

*I needed to stop
comparing my
present experience
with those luminous
months. I needed
to live now.*

I made my way again to Monhegan Island for a two-week course in Sensory Awareness. I cried every day as muscular holdings continued to release and my weight consciously settled onto firm ground. As my tears flowed, my heart softened in compassion for my own suffering. I emerged from my self-absorption and became less consumed with my own losses. I saw that others were suffering too, and my tenderness extended to them as well. I wept fully as my heart opened to the pain of the world. And with the tears came room for me to breathe again. I could

feel the pull of gravity while sitting, standing, lying down, and walking—and it felt pleasant. It wasn't as dramatic or intense as my former experiences had been, but it was clear, connected, wholesome and real.

PRACTICE

SELF-COMPASSION

At the heart of Buddhism is compassion, and at the heart of compassion is compassion for one's self.

- ◉ Think of something in your life that you struggle with or judge yourself for. Perhaps you feel disconnected, confused or lost. Maybe you experience shame, anger, fear, jealousy, or disappointment.
- ◉ Place your hand on your heart and gently say, *I am suffering.*
- ◉ If negative self-talk arises, such as I am bad, or I am not worthy, repeat again, I am suffering. Let yourself take that in.
- ◉ If you feel safe enough, let yourself touch the pain that perhaps you have never before let yourself feel.
- ◉ Continue holding your heart with compassion.

I know now that the innocence that I felt during that extended time of awe and wonder is gone. The belief that I was immune to the pain of the world will not come back.

I have returned to earth. I am in my body, and the planet is holding me.

These days, joy certainly still comes to visit. Old trees are often filled with sacred wisdom. Flowers still laugh from time to time. And occasionally a Loving Presence pervades everything. At those times my heart feels soft and feathery. I am “being,” in an open awareness that is fluid and caring. I feel spacious and full of love.

But joy is not the only visitor. Sadness, loneliness, fear, and anger also make their appearances. I fight with my sister and feel wretched. Sometimes trees are just trees and I am indifferent to flowers. These days, shadows as well as sunshine flow through me more consciously. Hatred and despair arise in me because I’m human and have human thoughts and emotions. I don’t have to live in denial of difficulties. I have more freedom now. There is an inner silent space that can hold what is present. I don’t always like what appears in this milieu, but I know the space of conscious awareness that can hold it all.

Would I trade how I am now for what I had back in those golden times, back in the “Exquisite Light”? There are certainly days when I would like to. However, I also know that during those two years, I entertained only half the picture. I distanced myself from a lot of reality in and around me. When I feel my mass and weight attracted to the solid earth beneath me, there is a quiet simplicity. What arises, arises, and can be met with natural presence and awareness. I feel more intimacy with all of myself and the totality of my surroundings.

Before I started my journey, if someone had told me that a reality that includes darkness would be more desirable than one that is all light, I wouldn’t have believed

them, yet the grounded happiness that I discovered in sensing and meditation is more whole. It includes hell realms as well as ecstatic states. It includes the traffic jams that sometimes happen when I am driving home, and the noise of a rowdy party at my neighbor's house until 3:00 am Saturday night.

I am a small piece of creation. I am a part of the earth's joys and sorrows like all of the other beings who live here. This brings a deep wordless happiness. I'm here, simple, complete.

These days I swing between comfortable, pleasant mind states and uncomfortable and unpleasant states, and back again, each time bringing me to a new sharpened capacity for balance. Now I know that we all go through glorious times in life, as well as challenges we think will never end, but they do, one way or another. When I reconnect with myself, I am paying attention to something

larger. I leave behind feelings of isolation, and I feel and recognize that I am a small piece of creation. I am a part of the earth's joys and sorrows like all of the other beings who live here. This brings a deep wordless happiness. I'm here, simple, complete.



CHAPTER 4

THE FREEDOM OF
EMBODIED PRESENCE

*Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes
you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world
needs is people who have come alive.*

Howard Thurman

In my childhood, a mimosa tree grew right outside my bedroom window. I delighted in its delicate pink puffy flowers, with their exotic fragrance. Its fanned leaflets looked like tiny ferns. I remember the first time I ran my finger down the slim shaft of one of the leaves. My eyes widened as the leaf moved, curling in, folding itself almost in half. “Look!” I exclaimed to my sister, “the leaves are hiding!” I discovered that if I left the leaf alone, after a while it would open again. If I touched it repeatedly, however, the leaf would close and stay closed. It wouldn’t reopen at all.

That happened to me as well. Without my noticing what was taking place, the painful experiences of my childhood started closing me up, shaping my personality to withdraw from anything that reminded me of the pain. Over time a natural confidence in myself and trust in life, along with eagerness and joy, diminished.

I didn't start out like that. I've been told that as a toddler I passionately and enthusiastically explored my new surroundings, taking in my environment with ears, eyes, skin, tongue, and nose. I can remember the glee of rolling down hills and doing cartwheels and summersaults. I recall testing my strength and limits, running and skipping, curling myself into a ball, hiding in small places, crawling under the dining room table to look at everyone's legs and feet. I have a distinct memory of coming home from kindergarten and squealing with delight upon seeing a rabbit in the vacant lot next door. I remember a small, blue egg in a nest that my brother found. I was astonished when he told me there was a bird inside. I remember my amazement the first time I saw snowfall and observed my backyard transform into a world of sheer whiteness. Sledding down the driveway on a piece of cardboard was thrilling. Why would anyone ever choose to stay indoors when there was so much excitement outside?

I recall my nine-year-old wonder the first time I visited the ocean. I was transfixed by the sparkling beauty of the sea. I had never imagined anything so amazing. The ocean stretched out forever, and it glittered like celestial diamonds. The water lapped at my feet. The waves exploded on the shore. The sand was endless; it squinched under my toes. The air brimmed with more substance than the air at home. The deep primordial smell of salt carried a memory of something pure and eternal. It spoke of a love that was boundless. Some part of me recognized this. I knew this place, this wholehearted in-your-face explosion of life: the enormity of beauty, everything in motion. Deep currents moved in me. I belonged here. I was home.

Meanwhile, my own family household was increasingly anything but a place where I felt I belonged that gave rise

to wonder. My childhood house was large and elegant, but not much of a home. It was a showpiece: Mom's work of art. The living room was off-limits to the kids. We weren't allowed in it until we were married. When guests came for dinner, we ate in the kitchen with the "help." When Dad arrived home from work, he went straight to the bar in the den and poured himself his first Jack Daniels of the evening. Mom was wrapped up in her own melodramas and catastrophes. So when my big brother Stephen would twist my arms behind my back until they were black and blue, Mom would just say, "He's only having fun." In the midst of all this, our little sister Carol always seemed lost. She was innocent, a quality we were quickly learning to chew up and spit out. When she was thirteen years old, Carol wrote *that* note and took a lot of pills. New Orleans Community Hospital woke her up, and we all pretended it never happened. Not a word was ever mentioned about it again. That elephant-in-the-room we were all ignoring had taken a dump, and we simply stepped around it.

In our extravagant Southern showcase house, I was surrounded by black servants who cooked, cleaned, made my bed and ironed my clothes. A man named Alfred chauffeured me to school. But the "help" stopped talking with each other when I walked into the room. Their mouths faked smiles. They said "Yes 'ma'am" to me as a girl. At the time I didn't understand the injustices and prejudices they faced that were fostering the animosity and terror living underneath their façades, but I could feel their anger and fear. I was achingly lonely, increasingly disconnected from the earth, my family and myself.

Meanwhile, we each got the unspoken message that we should be superlative. It didn't matter how—bad or good got equal attention. I opted for exceptionally bad. English

didn't hold enough adjectives for my mother to tell me and everyone else just how bad I was. I appeared on the outside to be indulged with all the material benefits; inside I was bereft. What I saw around me offered no model or sense of what it meant to be happy, kind or truly alive.

I remember running down the steps one summer afternoon when I was six years old and suddenly being stopped in my tracks by a strange scene on the porch. Two visitors were sitting opposite my parents. The woman's shoulders were slumped and her eyes were listless. Her mouth was limply smiling. My mother's back was straight and stiff as she returned an unconvincing smile. The man kept taking glances at his watch. They looked more like pictures than like living people. I had a startling realization that there was "no one home," that they weren't really "all there." It was certainly clear beyond any doubt that no one was having any fun.

I stood frozen on the stairs realizing that all of the "grown ups" I knew seemed a bit dulled down or removed from what was real. None cared about truly important things, like playing. I swore to myself then that I would never grow up. I turned, ran back up the stairs and had a serious talk with Carol, who was then four. We made a pact that if either of us noticed the other was growing up, we were to remind each other to be real and not forget.

It didn't work. I grew up. I didn't even remember the incident on the stairs until almost 20 years later, in the middle of a ten-day silent retreat. I was sitting in the meditation hall, lost in a daydream, entirely forgetting the instructions to follow my breath. Suddenly the memory vividly arose of that time when my own six-year-old tender innocence became shaken by the realization of what seemed to be my inevitable future. Remembering, I felt moved by that child's

earnest determination not to lose the sparkle of life. That was followed by deep sadness at what did happen to me. There had been countless moments in which I'd numbed myself, overriding my "original nature," as Charlotte Selver would call it, with a conditioned self that would become second nature to me. In place of that spontaneous vitality that had enlivened me, I learned how to talk circles around my feelings, hiding my fears, distrusting my intuitions, tightening my muscles to convince myself I was safe.

A pivotal step in building this defended self happened when I was in the second grade. Buster, an enormous German shepherd, lived next door. (Well, he was enormous for my 42 inches! Our eyes were the same distance from the ground.) Whenever the neighbor's back screen door opened and the dog was let out, I raced inside. One pleasant, sunny Saturday, my mother told me to go outside and play. I mutely shook my head. *No*. Knowing something was up, she pressed me.

"Buster." I said finally.

Mom put her hands on her hips. "You aren't afraid of a silly old dog, are you?"

I was.

She added, "I thought you were more grown up than that."

I wasn't.

"I'm disappointed in you," she said.

Crestfallen, I slinked to my room and curled up in bed.

It took me a few days to muster up the courage, but I was determined to be more grown up. *I can do it*, I whispered to myself. I went out to meet Buster.

I was terrified. I held my breath. He curled back his black lips and exposed monstrous snarling teeth. He made

a deep guttural growl that raised the hair on my arms. I ran back in, screen door banging hard behind me. As I watched him from behind the screen, the mailman arrived. Buster jumped up and barked, but he didn't attack. The mailman left, miraculously unharmed.

So I braved another attempt. I stepped out from behind the door and was greeted with a growl. I braced myself, stiffened my back, and held my ground. *I'm not afraid*, I lied to myself, holding my breath. I said it again out loud to make it more real. Buster believed my performance, gave up, and plopped himself down on the front step of his porch. I'd won my lonely battle. I'd denied my fear. I'd been a grown-up. I had learned that if I held my breath and tightened my throat, my sobs and tears would be stifled. If I made the muscles in my back rigid, I could push through fear. I had learned to calculate what and how to live based on what others expected of me.

In 1991, when I walked into a meditation hall to give one of my first dharma talks, I felt my back constrict in fear and found myself holding my breath. Suddenly the memory of Buster appeared, along with my automatic reaction—to avoid feeling overwhelming fear by dissociating and contracting in my musculature. Stiffening had got me through my fear of Buster, and I was about to use the same strategy in front of a room full of meditators.

In that moment I let myself touch the heart of fear, the inside of fear. I felt my muscles begin to relax. I breathed in and released a slow, easy breath. The seven-year old's fear of Buster had nothing to do with the present situation. I was *here*, embodied, and able to meet the moment. I sat down on my cushion, looked out at the waiting faces, and launched into my talk.

PRACTICE

FEELING FEAR

Fear is fed by stories that we tell ourselves.

- ◉ What happens in your body when thoughts such as these arise: I'm going to be late. I'm getting sick. My rent is being raised. I have to give a talk tomorrow. I've gained six pounds in the past two weeks.
- ◉ What is the story connected to the fear or anxiety that comes up? Does "Fear" say, *I will be miserable*? Maybe it says, *This will hurt*.
- ◉ Look at deeper fears, underneath the story. Is it fear of separation, isolation, or of the unknown, or is it fear of loss or of pain? Are you afraid of change or of losing control?
- ◉ Notice that most fear is based on ideas about the future.
- ◉ Distinguish between the story and the felt sense of fear. Scan your body. Where do you feel afraid? Do you feel pressure, shakiness or coldness? What does the raw felt sense of fear feel like? Does fear affect breathing? Can you drop the story and let the sensations pass through you?
- ◉ Now stop for a moment and consider that we don't ever really know what the future will bring and that at this moment you are safe.

We carry within the cells of our bodies the experiences that caused us, like the mimosa tree, to curl up in protection. After years of repeating these habits, we assume the tension in our grown-up bodies is natural. We carry on the battle long after the “war” is over. I remember being struck by the story of the Japanese “holdouts” after World War II. These soldiers, still loyal to their mission, were found hiding in the jungles on remote Pacific islands continuing to “fight the war” decades after it ended. They either didn’t believe reports of Japan’s defeat or the news had never gotten to them. The defenses built into our bodies are like these loyal soldiers, not yet aware that the war is over. As we realize that the initial reason for defensive action is long past, our defenses can release their limiting hold on our lives. Waking up to what is happening in our own anatomy, we are freed from the battles of the past and can surrender to the truth of the present.



Waking up to what was hidden and held in my body was literally a shattering experience for me. In one of her workshops, Charlotte began by suggesting that we lie on our backs and just rest. After a time of silence, she asked that we simply explore movement in our fingers and then in our hands. It was wonderful to feel my hands become animated. My fingers felt so long. I could feel the fluid movement in my joints, as if they were lubricated. I became aware of how the bones in my hands connected to my wrists.

After a while Charlotte asked us to stop moving our hands and to let them move by themselves, to just allow any movement that wanted to happen. *What does that*

mean? I thought. *How can my hands move if I don't move them?* I lay on my straw mat, breathing in the fragrance of its dried grass and pondering what she'd said. My fingers traced over the rough weave. I decided that what Charlotte was asking wasn't possible. *How could my hands move on their own? She must be getting senile.*

After class I went back to the attic space I had rented on the third floor of a small hotel. It was a quaint little room, lit only by kerosene lamps. Because of its dormer ceiling, I could bring my 5' 1" frame up straight on only one side of the room. Through a low window I had a view of the ocean in the distance. The room was furnished with a mattress on the floor and an old wooden bureau with a heavy beveled mirror.

I put my notebook and jacket on the bed, took a couple of steps to the bureau, and stood gazing into the mirror. Suddenly my hand came up, "by itself," in a fist that went through the mirror, shattering it. At that instant I remembered being in elementary school and two girls I had tried to be friends with were making fun of me. The anger I had managed to hide from myself all those years was there in my fisted hand, and it had come to expression.

I looked at myself in the broken glass. My right eye and eyebrow looked about an inch higher than my left. I saw four flaring nostrils, and my mouth in two different places. Cracks radiated out from the point where my fist had impacted the glass, leaving a fractured web where my chin should have been. The image before me was the reflection of pent up, unconscious anger. I stood looking at my distorted face, my breathing heavy in my upper chest and my heart pounding. I could still feel the impact in my fist, now fully alive with sensation, and I realized that

waking up my hand in Charlotte's class that morning had awakened the anger that had been dulled and restrained there. That unconscious anger had resulted in an unconscious action.

Our stories are held in our musculature, and when we become aware of the way we sit, stand, lie, move, we bring those stories to consciousness. Through both Sensory Awareness and Insight Meditation, I have learned that instead of being driven by the unconscious to shattering experiences, we can discover the freedom that comes from simply paying attention to the sensations in the body.



A meditation group meets every Monday night at my house. After sitting for an hour, we form a sharing circle for people to report what is happening in their lives. One particular evening I arrived feeling stuck and depressed. My writing was not going well, my cough was worsening, the rain wouldn't stop, my garden was suffering from too much water, I couldn't get to the mountains to hike, summer was almost over and my kids weren't coming to visit. Life was crummy, and I was down. I was looking forward to talking about all that in the sharing circle. I knew these friends would listen and sympathize with my depression. I wanted to tell them how stuck I felt so that they would feel sorry for me too, and I wouldn't be left feeling sorry for myself all alone.

The hour of meditation began, and I started carefully planning what I would "spontaneously" say when it was my turn to speak in the circle. I went over the list a few times so I wouldn't forget anything. I anticipated doing a good "share." That should make me feel better.

Fortunately, the practice began to kick in. I remembered to turn my attention inward and feel how I was sitting. I noticed that my shoulders were pressing forward, and my diaphragm was constricted. There was a pressure in the front of my chest. My breathing felt labored, and there was a sensation of squeezing in my sternum. As I accepted the sensations, instead of staying caught in my story of woe, they began to change. My shoulders released, and the emotional heaviness I'd been feeling started to lift. My chest lifted and my breathing became light as a feather.

Then the bell rang. The sit was over. It was time to share. I picked up the “talking stone,” ready to be the first to speak. I opened my mouth to begin reciting my carefully memorized list of woes. And nothing came out. I started again. No words. I still had in mind that list filled with such good reasons for why I should be depressed, but there was nothing supporting them. I felt fine . . . light actually. In that moment I was struck with the absurdity of wanting to harbor excuses for being miserable. I started giggling, then laughing. Laughter shook my shoulders and belly, and I couldn't stop. It was contagious. Soon the room was filled with laughter at the wordless joke. I wiped tears from my eyes, put my palms together, bowed, and passed the talking stone to the next person in the circle.

Mind and body are integrally connected. When we fixate on a limiting story in our mind, we stay stuck in our suffering. When we attend to the sensations arising in our body, the story begins to unravel, and we return to a more natural, innate immediacy that includes freshness, vitality, spontaneity, playfulness and warmth. As Eckhart Tolle says: “In the end you will always have to return to

Transformation is through the body, not away from it. the body, where the essential work of transformation takes place. Transformation is *through* the body, not away from it Do not turn your attention elsewhere in your search for the Truth, for it is nowhere else to be found but within your body.”



It was summer of 2002, and Colorado was suffering from the third year of a drought. Streams had shriveled and dried up, streambeds cracked. Wildflowers either didn't bloom or were pathetically puny. The air was arid. Our house, built into the side of a mountain, was surrounded by hundreds of acres of thirsty pine trees and parched golden-brown dry grasses.

I'd gone to bed early that evening, and was lazily dozing, listening to the sound of the cicadas. I was drifting in and out of sleep when Dennis, my husband, burst into the bedroom shouting, "Get up! There's a fire in the open space." I bolted up wide-awake, dressed and flew outside.

Grassfires spread rapidly and have the potential to change direction unexpectedly. Weed-eater in hand, I rushed out to the side of the house and began cutting dry grasses, bushes and limbs of trees. Dennis grabbed our garden hoses and started drenching the roof, the house, and the earth around it. Sirens from police cars and fire engines were blaring everywhere. One of the screaming trucks pulled into our driveway, and several suited firemen attached a flat large hose to the fire hydrant on the street. I could see the neighbors across the street working to protect their homes, but clearly ours was the most in jeopardy. It would be the first to be consumed by the

flames heading toward us. As I struggled to make a fire break, in my mind's eye we all looked like ants frantically scrambling to repair a trampled hill.

Deer and coyote barreled past us. Neighbors started grabbing their precious items, putting them in their cars and leaving. Soon only the firemen, police, one friend, Dennis and I remained. We continued working in silent intensity, one organism with one goal, as the unrelenting, awe-inspiring, terrifying living force of nature approached, hungrily devouring everything that could not escape. I watched in awe as the fire approached us on two sides, consuming dry trees and grass with exquisite, ferocious beauty. How deluded I had been to think we could withstand its force, how profoundly small I was, how insignificant, and how completely unable to control this situation. We were being enveloped by a raging energy that was crackling and alive, demanding and relentless. The fire was consuming our thoughts as well as everything it met.

I let go. I said goodbye in my heart to my home and to everything I owned. The fire would do what it wanted. Our attempts were meager against what was happening. The roaring flames approached us head on. The firemen backed their truck down the driveway to the street. We had done all we could do. The world had changed. Life would be different for us now. I waited in shock and grief.

When the fire was thirty feet away, the wind abruptly shifted. We watched, astounded, as the flames moved up the mountain and passed behind the house. Seated together on the cement, dirty and exhausted, we laughed and cried. The life we had taken for granted for years once again became possible. Our house remained intact and our neighbors' houses untouched.

The next morning, in shock I looked out at the smoking, scorched remains of acres of grasses with a few smoldering black trees poking up their empty branches. There was an eerie quiet. No birds or insects remained. The full impact of the last twelve hours began to settle in my consciousness like ash. My confident assumption had been that my house would be here always—a security built on ashes. It was humbling and gratifying that in all of its horror, beauty and fury, nature is still bigger than I am.

Change can and does happen in an instant. The unexpected forces us to stop our ever-tumbling-forward movement, insisting that we simply be here, with ourselves, with our life, and with our truth, open to the pleasant and the unpleasant. In the face of that wild fire, I was compelled to discover once again that this moment is all that I have, and

Surrendering is about releasing the urge to hold onto anything, including my stories, my beliefs and my ideas.

I never know what the next will hold. All we can do is surrender to the truth of the moment.

Insight Meditation and Sensory Awareness teach me that surrendering is about releasing the urge to hold onto anything, including my stories, my beliefs and my ideas. Surrender means letting go of attachment to my desires and expectations, relinquishing my thoughts and attempts to manipulate life. It also means surrendering my certainty about who I think I am and how I think things should be.

A sign I kept on my desk for a few years said, “Good morning. This is God. I will be handling all of your problems today, and I will not need your help, so enjoy your

day.” Although we can make choices, clearly we are not in control. The good news is that this is also good news. Surrendering to life as it is gives us the freedom to meet the next moment, fully present and awake.



A huge ancient willow tree used to grow on the shores of Wonderland Lake, near my home. I would bring along a book and sit beneath its branches, reading. Sometimes I would just sit and gaze at the water, content to be held in the comfort of the willow’s graceful beauty.

One March day a ferocious wind arose. The next day when I hiked down to the trail surrounding the lake, I found that the enormous trunk of the willow had cracked, and “my” tree had toppled over into the water. My heart was heavy as I saw it lying half submerged, and I sadly said goodbye to my old friend.

A few months later, on a fresh green morning in July, I made my way down to the lake for my usual hike. As I passed the old tree trunk that lay in ruins, my heart jumped into my throat. Small sprouts were emerging out of what I had assumed was dead bark. I sat down next to the fallen willow, amazed at the persistent movement of life, life that wants to be lived, constantly ending and beginning.

The numberless blades of dry grass that died last winter began anew this spring. Striving against all odds, the bindweed cracks through the asphalt in my driveway to reach the light. I cut my finger, the blood clots, a scab forms, drops off and leaves a small scar that soon disappears. Charlotte Selver’s teacher, Elsa Gindler, called her own classes “Work on the Human Being.” One of the underlying principles in Gindler’s work is that “There is an

*There is an innate
tendency of the
organism toward
wholeness and
optimal
functioning.*

innate tendency of the organism toward wholeness and optimal functioning.” She understood that all living things want to heal, to thrive, and to grow. Sprouts shoot up from a fallen tree. A wound heals itself. I am caught in a story of how miserable my life is, and then coming home to the natural process of life in my body, I am freed.



CHAPTER 5

AN EIGHTEEN-INCH HOLE

..when you do something, you should do it with your whole body and mind; you should be concentrated on what you do. You should do it completely... You should burn yourself completely.”

Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

That morning, like so many others during the previous months, I'd seen Oliver and Shannon off to the school bus, poured myself a cup of coffee, and sat down to scan the classifieds again, looking to find a particular dream. The three of us were living now in Austin, Texas, in a very small apartment, and I was longing to move away from city life, to get the kids out to the country where they could grow up closer to the earth. As my eyes tracked through the columns of tiny print, a particular ad caught my attention: 36 acres in the Texas Hill Country. I set down my coffee cup, picked up the phone and dialed the number. The owner and I made an appointment to meet that same morning.

Following his directions, I drove out Bee Caves Road, took the first left immediately past the sharp curve, tracked seven-tenths of a mile, and slowed down. It was country alright. No houses. A red Chevy pickup was parked on

the side of the road. I pulled up behind and got out. A tall, thin, elderly man wearing jeans, cowboy boots and a wide-brimmed ten-gallon hat stepped out of the truck. Grinning, he held out his hand and, in a long Texas drawl, said, "I'm Bubba."

Bubba and I climbed through sagebrush up a steep hill. At the top we stepped out of the brush onto a sandstone clearing. *Big enough for a house*, I commented to myself. Before us lay a sweeping view of rolling hills covered with live oak, sumac, mesquite, and Eastern red cedar. I turned around and there behind us, on the far end of this sandstone shelf, the land dropped off. "A limestone rock quarry," Bubba explained. We walked over and stood at the edge looking into a huge hole carved into the earth. It looked to be about an acre and a half, with a couple of feet of standing water filled with wild plants and mounds of dirt. Pleasant images arose in my mind of another quarry where I'd spent a sweltering summer day two years earlier.

My friend Abbie was visiting, and we were hiking in the hills west of Austin. We'd left the trail and chanced on a quarry filled with water. We looked at each other and without hesitation or discussion, stripped off our shorts, tops and underwear and jumped naked into the cool, sparkling, limestone-filtered water. For the remainder of that afternoon, we swam and floated lazily on our backs, looking up at the cloudless Texas sky.

I envisioned replicating that feeling right here, for myself and for the children. This was the land I wanted to buy, and I knew exactly where I wanted to build the house. I could imagine Oliver and Shannon joyfully playing in that quarry—once I'd improved it a little. Bubba and I did some negotiating right then and there, settled on a price, and

soon I was the happy owner of 36 acres of hilly Texas dirt.

I was in my *I'm-a-strong-independent-woman, I-can-do-it-myself* phase, so I resolved to build the house with my own hands. I was absurdly confident of my capability even though I had never built anything before and had no experience whatsoever in construction. I had read Richard Scarry's book, *What Do People Do All Day*, to my children, and we'd all been delighted with the colorful pictures of little animals dressed up as happy people doing plumbing and carpentry. It showed what was hidden inside the walls of a house, how the clean water came in and the drains took the dirty water out. It looked so easy. I thought, *I could do this! I could build a house.*

The first thing I learned was that I would need a permit from the county in order to put in a septic system. I was told it would require a hole eighteen inches deep to determine the speed at which water percolated into the ground and therefore what size septic system would be needed. Okay, I figured, that would be easy enough.

One cloudless morning in April, I arrived at the remote building site, bearing a steel bar and a pick axe, and commenced to enthusiastically jab at the solid rock. After several hours in the sweltering heat, the "hole" was less than two inches deep. I parked myself on a rock between two prickly pear cacti, dropped my head in my hands and sobbed. I sat there for a long time, stunned at the enormity of the task in front of me. *What had I been thinking?* I stood up, wiped the sweat off my forehead, and courageously declared, "I can't do this." I got back in my truck and headed home with my tail between my legs.

But the next morning I felt better and, not knowing what else to do, I drove back to my hillside and began

picking away. I excavated another three inches before my motto arose again: “I can’t do this.” Smelling of sage and sweat, I drove home with a heavy feeling in my chest. I collapsed in bed that evening, curling myself into fetal position. Anguished thoughts revolved in my mind, *How did I get myself into this? I am so stupid to have thought I could actually do this. I can’t possibly do something as big as build a house. Now what will I do?*



As I lay there in the dark, I suddenly remembered a time, four years earlier, when I had said the exact same thing to myself. It was during my first ten-day meditation retreat with Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg. Kerrville, Texas, 1976. I’d remembered Joseph from that wonderful summer at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, and his talks had deeply affected me. It had been a profound awakening, and the spiritual high had lasted for months after. So when I’d heard that he was giving a meditation retreat in my own state, I was ready for more. Oh boy! Ten days of great talks, new ideas, exhilaration, joy! I’d eagerly signed up, packed my ancient Volkswagen van, and happily headed out of town.

The first morning of the retreat we gathered together in a gym, converted into a meditation hall, and took vows of silence. I vaguely remembered having heard or read something about silence during these retreats. *Did that mean I wasn’t supposed to talk? What would I do if I needed to say something?* We received instruction to pay attention to our breath, and when we noticed that our minds had wandered off, we were to bring our attention back to breathing. *Okay, but when are we going to get to the good stuff, the spiritual high I came for?* I noticed a few breaths

then tried to entertain myself by thinking of things, anything to pass the time. I sat there, and I sat there, and I sat there. I sat the whole morning and the entire afternoon. And I slumped lower and lower as the endless day wore on. *This couldn't be it, could it?*

The next day I realized that this *was* it . . . and *it* was out of the question for me. There was no way I could just sit still for ten days of this. I made a plan to escape. Early the third morning before anyone else was awake, I gathered up my sleeping bag, suitcase and toothbrush, and tiptoed out of my dorm room into the cool dawn air. Hoping no one would see me, I slinked to my van, climbed in and turned the key. Nothing. The battery was dead. I was trapped.

I met with Joseph privately and contritely told him, "I just can't do this for another eight days." Joseph's response is something that has stayed with me for decades. "You don't have to sit here for another eight days," he said. "You just have to sit here for *this* moment." I went back to my place in the gym and remained for the duration of the retreat.

Digging into that rock-hard soil in the hot Texas sun, Joseph's words came back to me: "You just have to sit here for this moment." And in that moment I changed my job description from "Digging an eighteen-inch hole" to "Swinging a pickaxe one more time." I advanced 1/32 or 1/64 of an inch at a time. After a few more days, I became aware that despite the fact that nothing seemed to be happening, the hole was now twelve inches deep. Even though I'd concluded that I couldn't do it, in actuality I didn't know if I could or not. My doubt changed to curiosity, which spawned energy, and I continued to work. Shortly thereafter, on one of my strokes, the pickaxe once again hit rock . . . and went right straight

If we just keep coming back, breath by breath, or return time after time to the felt sense in our legs or belly, something starts to shift and we break through to a deeper level inside of us.

through to dirt. I *was* doing it.

Meditation and Sensory Awareness work can seem like this—nothing appears to be happening, even when we’ve paid attention to the breath for a week or felt the weight of our pelvis coming down to rest on the earth a hundred times. But if we just keep coming back, breath by breath, or return time after time to the felt sense in our legs or belly, something starts to shift and we break through to a deeper level inside of us.

During the year it took me to build my house, many times I declared, *I can’t do this*, and hundreds of times I said, *I can’t stand it any longer*. Sometimes my sticky stubborn thoughts would cast a spell over me, and I would become dejected and quit early. I would become immobilized for a while. Slowly it dawned on me that “I can’t do this” was code for “This is hard,” or “I don’t like this,” but it didn’t mean I couldn’t do it. Maybe I could. This had happened to me before, and things had turned out different from what I’d feared. I began to reframe my self-talk to: *I don’t know*. Often I added another little note: *Thank you for sharing. Now let’s get back to work.*



Spending days on the building site engaged in physical labor gave me plenty of time for reflection. I thought about the enormous power my thoughts held. Certainly my mind served me in thousands of constructive ways. I loved the practicality of organizing and planning. I

loved the process of designing the layout of the house. There were ways, however, that my mind was not my friend. Whenever I encountered a setback in building, or the results weren't what I expected, I would quickly conclude: *I'm not good enough* or *I'm a failure*. Then I would embellish those thoughts with, *I can't do anything right. I was stupid to believe I could build a house*, and on and on, leaving me sullen, heavy and moping around.

"I can't do this" was code for "This is hard," or "I don't like this," but it didn't mean I couldn't do it. Maybe I could.

I remember one day on the site asking myself, *What does "I'm a failure" actually mean?* Then I set a nail in position and swung the hammer. When it hit, the nail bent. Instead of the clean satisfying experience of the nail penetrating the wood, I got frustration instead. I was "a failure" again. As I turned my hammer around to use the claw to pull the bent nail out, I realized that "I'm a failure" in this instance meant a nail didn't go in right. Sometimes it meant I was frustrated or tired. Sometimes I blamed myself for things that were out of my control, like when the lumber company didn't have redwood 2x6's in stock, or the price of roofing tiles had doubled.

Most importantly, I realized that I believed all my thoughts whether they made sense or not. Not only did I believe them, I lived most of my life swallowed up by them. Building that house gave me plenty of time to figure out a better strategy, like the one I'd learned in meditation—to notice thoughts as energies arising and to choose which to pursue and which to release, depending on whether they were helpful or not in a given situation.

PRACTICE

FORGIVENESS PRACTICE

Forgiveness for others or ourselves does not condone the deed that was done. We can learn to deplore an act and at the same time love and forgive the person who did it.

- ◉ Place your hand over your heart. Can you feel your heart beating into your hand? Set an intention to release whatever might be in the way of your heart opening. Now say each of the following phrases to yourself. Speak them softly out loud;
- ◉ *I forgive myself for believing the thought, I'm not good enough. I forgive myself for all the ways in which I have betrayed myself.*
- ◉ *I forgive myself for caring too much what others might think, causing me to go against my own best interest and my deeper values.*
- ◉ *I forgive myself for abandoning myself.*
- ◉ *I forgive myself for not accepting myself exactly the way I am.*
- ◉ *I forgive myself for taking for granted this amazing, precious and finite life.*
- ◉ *I forgive myself for my compulsion to be in control in a world that is ultimately out of control.*
- ◉ *May I be filled with loving-kindness. May I love and accept myself just the way I am, this body, this heart, and this life.*
- ◉ Pause for a moment and take in the deepest sincerity of your wish.

Through Insight Meditation, we realize that everything we know, internally and externally, depends on our sense perceptions: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling. Buddhism identifies a sixth sense: thinking. Through thinking we create a narrative about what we perceive. Our eyes perceive light. Ears are sensitive to a certain range of vibrations. Olfactory neurons fire when stimulated, and we smell an odor or fragrance. Our skin detects touch. We put a peach in our mouths and taste buds explode with sensation. Once perception has happened, neurons fire as we flip through our past experiences to find a name for the impression: “traffic light, Beethoven, brownies baking, breeze passing, peach.” This all happens within less than a fraction of a second.

Next, instantly, we elaborate on and evaluate our experience. “Delicious. I like peaches, I could make a pie with these peaches.” Our assessments take us one step removed from the actual experience. That’s where the stories start. We remember the first peach pie we ever made. And suddenly a sensation of discomfort arises in our body—failure. That first pie was a mess, and the mind is off to the races. *I’m a failure at everything I do. Why do I even try, etc.* The delicious peach has turned into a painful experience.

Charlotte Selver said the same thing in a different way, reminding us repeatedly to return to the present moment’s direct concrete experience. She would ask us, “How much space is there in the back of your neck?” “What does it feel like in the soles of your feet?” Sometimes she might suggest we tap ourselves in a lively manner in order to “wake ourselves up,” to rouse us out of habitual automatic response and into the present.

We don’t have to concern ourselves with what is going to happen in the next eight days, or how long it will take to dig the next 1/64th of an inch into our own rocky

Staying alive to our experience in this moment leads us to the next moment and aligns us with a flow and wholeness in our lives.

soil. Using our mental facility to plan ahead can be of course very helpful, but attaching worry and fear only adds a layer of chaos. Staying alive to our experience in this moment leads us to the next moment and aligns us with a flow and wholeness in our lives.



The first week after we closed on the sale of my piece of Texas Hill Country heaven, I rented a front-end landscape loader and scraped out the dirt and plant growth from the bottom of the old rock quarry. I forged a dam on one side to stop the water from flowing out, pumped in water from my new well, and we had our own quarry pond. When I started construction on the house, a friend gave me four baby ducks to swim around in it.

The ducklings spent some time in the pond, but mostly they waddled in a line following me as I navigated around the building site. When I sat down for lunch under a scrawny mesquite tree, the ducklings stopped and pecked at the buffalo grass and bits of sandwich that I threw down for them. When I walked back to my truck, they tottered in formation behind me. I put them in the back of my pickup when I went home at night, and they slept in the bathtub in my apartment.

Those ducklings provided me another good lesson. As I watched them, I recognized how easy it is to waddle around “on automatic,” preprogrammed to follow “mother” or whoever else we’re supposed to trust and look up to. They reminded me of something that happened when

I was five years old and my little sister was three.

Carol and I always copied what our big brother did. Stephen was much older—all of seven years old—and we looked up to him in more ways than one. One afternoon we toddled after him as he walked into the den. He picked up a cold cigarette butt out of the ashtray and pretended to smoke. Sucking in, he leaned his head back and blew out into the air. When he put the butt back in the ashtray, I picked it up and held it between my straight second and third fingers, like the glamorous women I had seen in mother's magazines. I tilted my head back, like Stephen, brought the cigarette to my lips, and with dreamy eyes pretended to enjoy it—even as I breathed in the nasty stale tobacco smell. Slowly and elegantly, I blew out imaginary smoke, then placed the butt back in the ashtray.

Carol of course had been watching this show. She reached out and picked the cigarette butt out of the ashtray. We watched as she slowly brought it to her face, put it in her mouth, grimaced and proceeded to eat it!

Like baby ducks, we follow our models whether what they do is good for us or not. We first smoke cigarettes or use drugs because we see those we think we're supposed to follow doing it. The baby ducks would have trailed me across a busy street, because following is what they were programmed to do. In my new life I was waking up to my "programming," learning to be more vital and spontaneous in the moment, to respond creatively to ever-changing circumstances, without resorting to habit.

Our limiting stories and attitudes are also habits. I saw this clearly on one of the first ten-day retreats I attended as a student. I happened to arrive late for breakfast, and all of the fruit, nuts and yogurt had been put away. Anxious,

I grabbed a bowl of oatmeal just before a server was about to remove the large pot. The cereal was lukewarm and there was nothing left to put on it. My nose wrinkled. I was about to launch into *This kind of thing always happens to me* when I remembered, “Just be with what is and don’t compare it to past experience.” I sat down and slowly lifted the spoon, feeling its weight. I carefully attended to the touch of the oatmeal in my mouth, noticing how my tongue responded. Swallowing was intriguingly complex. I noticed my tongue pressing the oatmeal to the roof of my mouth. Feeling it going down my esophagus was a great surprise. The process fascinated me. Joy ensued. Being in the moment had allowed me to discover something new about life. To this day, I continue to love plain tepid oatmeal!

Eating that oatmeal, I saw clearly that less than a fraction of a second after I tasted my food, my mind had started reflecting, comparing and contrasting. I was often not conscious at all of the original sensation of contact or taste. The Buddha said we should train in such a way that in seeing, there is only the seen; in hearing, only the heard; in sensing, only the sensed; in thinking, only the thought . . . there is no you in connection with that. This, just this, is the end of suffering.” Seeing sees. Hearing hears. Tasting tastes. Touching touches. Smelling smells. It had been my habit to ignore my direct sense experience and live in my concepts and commentaries, perpetuating the conditioned and limiting stories I tell myself about who I am. The way back to my “original nature” was through attending to sensation, as Sensory Awareness and Insight Meditation were teaching me.

I still hear the automatic “I can’t do it’s” whenever I undertake something new, like learning to ski or writing a

book. That line is still part of the habitual “story” I tell myself. I am more aware of it now, so I don’t get so caught in embellishing it. When I recognize those thoughts, I remember that, in truth, they have no substance at all and are merely mental constructs, with no body and no form and no substance. They are like air, or less than air. They weigh nothing, are invisible, elusive and intangible, yet when I believe them they can run my life to ruin, or at least make me miserable. Such undermining thoughts are just part of an old familiar narrative. And in the end they don’t help in digging eighteen-inch holes.

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CHAPTER 6

FACEDOWN IN THE SNOW

Never let the mind desert the body.

Achaan Mun

A fall storm had dusted the ground with powdery snow, and the ski slopes opened early. Ecstatic, I ran to the garage for my skis, poles and boots. I climbed up to reach the plastic tub that held the rest of my gear: helmet, goggles, gloves, my faded red down parka. The next morning Dennis and I rose before the sun, packed up, and drove to Copper Mountain.

The sunlight reflected off pristine snow, dazzling my eyes. Excited and thrilled to be on the slopes again, I felt goose bumps rise on my arms as I glided down the mountain. Feeling my body shift and flow in relationship to gravity was delightful and invigorating. An inner vitality woke up in response to the challenges of navigating the terrain. I felt agile, lithe, confident and free.

Around 11:00 a.m., after several exhilarating trips down the slopes, I skied to the side of the run about midway down to catch my breath and wait for Dennis, who always skied behind me in case I fell or needed help. I stood leaning on my poles, breathing hard, adrenaline

surging through my bloodstream. I was tingling with life and energy. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a young, 250-pound snowboarder out-of-control barreled into my back, flattening my 98-pounds. I dropped to the ground in slow motion, and the snowy whiteness spun me into another world.

Time stopped. Time didn't exist. Light dimmed and disappeared into blackness. Sound vanished into deep silence. A far away, yet clearly discernible, glowing yellow light was emerging from a long tube-like channel. The light appeared infinite, radiant and shockingly beautiful. It was totally consuming. There was nothing else, not even the beginning of a thought. It was blinding, deafening, complete and exquisite. The light extended back to the beginning or the bottom of something ineffable. At the source, words materialized—not the kind of words that ears hear or eyes see, but words nonetheless: *Love... Is.... All....There....Is.*



Blinking through blurry eyes, I watched Dennis come into focus. He was standing looking down at me. His face was haggard, but he was smiling. I was in a bed. I was in a hospital room. I was confused. What happened?

A tall young doctor, wearing a long white medical jacket and glasses with coke bottle lenses, appeared through a slit in the white curtain. Sternly, he instructed me not to move. He turned to Dennis and said, “Fragments of bone have landed adjacent to her spine.” Then to me, “If splinters of bone contact the spinal cord, you could be paralyzed for life.” He said it in the same tone as “I think it is going to rain today.”

The impact had broken and crushed two vertebrae. Life as I had known it came to a screeching halt.

Wait! I'm scheduled to lead a meditation class on Sunday. Clients are counting on me for appointments. I was planning to leave town and go on a retreat over Thanksgiving. I have plans to visit my son and his children. I need to make flyers for an upcoming retreat. My to-do list regularly exceeded two pages. Meetings and appointments saturated my calendar, seven days a week. I couldn't just stop! Life hadn't even said, "I'm sorry." It just declared: "That's it for now."

For many years I'd been reading about and exploring the truth of impermanence. During many retreats I had contemplated the fragility, finiteness and preciousness of life. The Buddha's teaching that "Your life can change with one swish of a horse's tail" made sense—in theory. However, living the truth of it was a shock. With this "wake up call" I knew for the first time that utterly unexpected change could happen to *me*.

It was a new life—moored to my bed at home, my chest shackled by a brace, I was sentenced to a pain-filled immobility. The pain was beyond tolerable. I cried, got angry, felt terror, fell apart, begged for medicine. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to sit up or walk again. I contemplated the hours, days, weeks and months that I would have to live with this uncertainty. Pain radiated from everywhere. Fear mocked me: *Paralyzed for life, Paralyzed for life. Paralyzed for life.* Disappointment and Loss taunted me with the plans that had shattered along with my vertebrae. Restlessness and Irritation urged me to get away, any way I could. Helplessness and Despair informed me that there was nowhere to go. Bitterness resented it all. These "visitors" came often and did not bring flowers or good wishes. And Happiness was far, far away.

Medication didn't lessen the relentless pain, and it added unpleasant side effects. When I picked up something to read, my eyes skimmed vacantly over the page without comprehending what they saw. After a few days of tormented confinement, I said to myself, *Okay Terry, what are your options now?* I could get angry at what happened and what I was going through. Anger had been my habitual response when things didn't go my way. But something had changed in me. That vision or insight I'd had at the moment of impact on the mountain had somehow changed that automatic response. So what other options did I have now? It was impossible to distract myself and ignore what I was feeling. I tried bargaining: *Okay, if I observe this pain, it will go away.* It didn't. I tried tolerating it, enduring it. It broke me. It knocked me to my knees, and demanded all the will, concentration and energy I had, and often more than I had.

By that time I had been practicing Insight Meditation and Sensory Awareness for thirty years. It was time to apply what I'd learned. During long meditation retreats, paying attention whenever I was uncomfortable had been challenging enough. I would often contract from painful sensations, anesthetizing myself by getting lost in my thoughts and emotions, attempting to be anywhere else but in the present. But now the ante was up. There was no escape. It would take me months of determined effort to learn how to stay in the embodied experience of the present moment however difficult it was.

Meanwhile, I went to doctors, I went to healers, I went to therapists. I took pills, I tried herbs. I got treatments, I got massages. When there was nothing that would bring relief, I was forced to look inside. In the

*The way in would
be the way out.*

middle of the night, I wrestled with my dark angels. I began to find that the trick was to turn into the pain. The way in would be the way out.



Intellectually I knew that healing wouldn't mean going back to how life was, but rather allowing the circumstances to change me. I'd gone through this before. I remembered waking up and discovering there was more to life than specials at the grocery store, and then getting sick and crashing from my spiritual high. I'd gone on to discover an entirely new life. I could find a way again. I could find a way to turn with kindness into the emotional and physical pain.

I began by asking my body what it needed to heal. It was communicating very clearly through the direct experience of sensation, though I didn't want to hear what it was trying to tell me. Pain was asking me to become the pain, resign to the pain, die to it, surrender.

Surrender! Surrender denoted failure. When we were kids, each time my brother Stephen picked up the ping-pong paddle, his eyes narrowed and his expression hardened. He was intensely focused on winning. If I scored higher than he did, the rules changed, and I was forced to comply. Sometimes when we were outside, he'd grab me and push me face down on the ground, demanding that I say "Uncle," that I surrender. Hurt and angry, I would scream "Uncle!" Surrender meant losing.

In spiritual practice, however, I'd been learning that the word surrender had a different meaning. Surrender meant giving up any and all attempts to control. It meant not resisting what was happening. It meant accepting myself exactly the way I was—and embracing life as it presented

itself. To surrender was to give up my stories, my beliefs, my ideas about the way things should be. Surrender meant letting go of attachment to my desires and expectations, relinquishing my thoughts and attempts to manipulate a situation. In my spiritual life I surrendered not to losing and captivity but to freedom. My tightened muscles could loosen their grip, let go and allow life to unfold. When I surrendered, I won.

*In my spiritual life
I surrendered not to
losing and captivity
but to freedom.*

But surrendering to the pain so it would go away hadn't worked. I had to truly say, "Yes" to it, or at least "Okay, I don't like you, but here we are again." Surrender was not something I could *make* happen. It was a process of accepting, receiving, permitting, moment-by-moment, whatever was presenting itself. Each bout with pain was unprecedented, and I was required to look again and again with new eyes at what I hated and what seemed to be intolerable. I couldn't stop the pain. The only thing I could change was how I met it. I had to touch the pain, let it chew me up and spit me out as something else.

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It took a while to get there. I collapsed, I cried and complained. I whined and felt sorry for myself. Once in a while I genuinely met and touched the sorrow, the heaviness in my chest, and I would weep for my losses. Then the process would start all over again. My mischievous friend Resistance showed up often, and it took resolve and determination to meet him. In order to let go into

what was happening, I had to sense the resistance that was held in my musculature second by second, sometimes a thousand times a day.

When I could turn with kindness toward the intensity of sensation, I could begin to perceive that deep pains are often constellations. For instance, when my jaw would clench to contract from the pain, turning to meet that experience, I would feel the grip release. But then I might notice that my shoulders were squeezing up. As they softened, I often felt my stomach muscles holding in a knot. As I felt and examined each layer of tension, it would unravel itself, only to reveal some deeper constriction.

If I stayed with the process through the layers of contractions, the original, raw pain would express itself.

*Pain became me;
I became it.
I became the
throbbing, the
burning and
the aching; no
separation.*

There would be no labeling with words, only the experiencing. At that point there was no “self” who was meeting what was happening. There was only a flowing river of sensation. Pain became me; I became it. I became the throbbing, the burning and the aching; no separation. The fire in my crushed vertebra would blaze bright for several moments then burn itself out. A small miracle would happen. The pain would disappear. *Where did it go?* Although relief would be short-lived, lasting only twenty or thirty minutes before re-emerging, the most excruciating pain would actually evaporate, like burning paper turning to smoke, ash and heat. Amazing. The energy that had previously been used to hold myself away from the sensation would be freed, and I would experience relief, contentment and peace.

I observed that pain always morphed and changed, and often I perceived gaps or spaces in the experience of misery. There were even times when the pain simply disappeared on its own. It was a fickle, fluid process. Repeatedly I was required to start from scratch and discover the unique way each particular moment demanded attention, each time beginning anew. When I could honestly let go and allow the challenge to be bigger than I was, the pain had the space to change.

I discovered that trying to control the pain was just another more subtle level of manipulation that would dig me deeper into the control hole. I also had to meet, accept and make friends with this need to control, get to know it and accept it, as I had with the pain. As I lay on the floor meditating—because I couldn't sit up—I noticed how often I was trying to control my breath, trying to “fix” it and make it more comfortable. When instead I just observed the subtle squeezing in my trachea on exhalation, within four or five breaths it would release. Breathing would become delightful—soft, free and fresh. The effects of this rippled up off the cushion and into the rest of my life, giving rise to a new ease in how I could meet not only the pain, but my husband, my children, and my ability to love people as they were and not as I wished them to be. Again and again I faced the same lesson of observing and allowing.

That endless year brought about profound changes. I got a PhD in Fear and Pain. I was forced to confront many demons. The work demanded complete capitulation. It was a journey into the unknown, revealing possibilities and insights I might never have realized without it.

Though the pain was real and often brutal, in fact it was only sensation. While I was well aware that my pain

was arising from the fractures in my back, and I needed to take care of that condition, the implications of the pain and the pain itself were two separate things. The physical misery was hard enough; the stories I told myself—about how it would never end—only added to the suffering.

When I caught my self-talk announcing, *This is intolerable*, I learned to ask myself, *What does intolerable feel like? How do I feel it? Where do I feel it? Can I examine the sensation?* When I whined, *It's too much. I can't stand it*, I reassured myself, *You've just come to the edge of your tolerance. Let yourself stand there.*

When I found myself silently muttering, *No! I hate this! Stop. Go away, Pain*, I would try to remember to change my self-talk to: *May I find the strength to meet what's happening now.*

I would try to remember to change my self-talk to May I find the strength to meet what's happening now.

Like a holy underground river, the awareness of that life-changing moment of impact on the mountain, when I saw the amazing light and “heard” that love is at the heart of everything, ran below my entire period of recovery. Each time a bout of pain had passed, I would feel grateful and even blessed by having gone through it. My determined, controlling ego relented as my body and my heart softened and opened. A healing *was* happening, and clearly who I was before was not who I was after the process had etched a path in my psyche. Fears and irritation subsided and acceptance grew.

As I paid intimate attention to the pain in my body and mind, it was as if my whole existence, the reason I was born on earth, was for this, to be with each moment's experience. And, in fact, it was. I was learning to *Let It Be*,

as the Beatles so famously sang. I'd had a crash course in that lesson.

However, class wasn't over yet ...



It had been two years since the accident on the mountain had fractured my spine. I was still a little skittish about skiing, but I had recovered and returned to an active life filled with yoga, swimming, kayaking and hiking. So when a friend phoned to ask if I wanted to co-lead a seven-day backpacking and meditation retreat along the rugged and untouched Lost Coast Trail in California, I blurted out "Yes!" even before he had finished asking. I hung up and did a little dance around the room, shouting, "Yes, yes, yes!" I thought of salty sea air filling my nostrils. I imagined reconnecting to the land and myself while teaching and leading meditation. What could be better?

I ran down to the garage and located my large blue backpack on top of some old snowshoes. It smelled like dirt. It was heavier than I remembered it. It was empty except for my crumpled checklist of backpacking gear in the bottom. I deciphered the faded ink: sunscreen, lip balm, sunglasses, jacket, vest, raingear, hat, flashlight, extra batteries, first aid kit, matches, waterproof container, knife, food, water, munchies, sleeping bag, tent. Wait. Where was my tent? A little more rummaging and I found a large grey plastic storage tub filled with most of my camping paraphernalia. The tent smelled of wood-smoke. Wilderness and black, star-filled nights flashed through my mind. I brought everything upstairs and lovingly cleaned it all, dreaming of the scent of pine and the sound of waves.

It was as if my whole existence, the reason I was born on earth, was for this, to be with each moment's experience.

Then I filled the pack, checking each item off the list.

The next morning I was ready to try it all out on a hike. “I can’t believe we used to carry these!” I shouted up the stairs to Dennis, as I lifted the pack by its straps. He came down and watched me heave the cumbersome load onto my back. “It didn’t used to be this heavy!” I complained. He smiled nostalgically, perhaps remembering our many outdoor adventures. “Do you have water and food in it yet?” he asked. “No,” I said, my enthusiasm momentarily waning. But I had a month to get ready—enough time to get in shape if I pushed it. With set jaw and loaded pack, I hiked out into the foothills that were still wet and muddy from melting spring snow.

That night, I was jolted awake from a nightmare with electrical pains shooting down the backs of my legs. *That’s strange* I thought and went back to sleep. The following day I hiked again. That evening, two hours after falling asleep, I had a similar rude awakening. Bolts of electricity firing downward from my hips to my feet had activated another dreadful dream. Within two weeks, any walking, with or without the pack, would trigger this sudden, frightening shock during the night. Over the next few weeks the condition progressively worsened. After even a short walk, the pain was excruciating. Then simply standing produced the same outcome. I could only avoid the pain by not standing up at all.

I dragged myself to the phone and aborted the trip.

I went to orthopedic surgeons. I went to neurologists. They poked, examined and x-rayed. Physical therapists gave me exercises. Chiropractors adjusted me. Rolfers aligned me. Acupuncturists pushed needles into my meridians and freed up my congested chi. Energy healers cleared me. I went to psychics who told me about past lives. I went to astrologers who could see this misfortune in my chart.

Healers changed my diet and my hiking boots. They prayed over me. Zip.

This couldn't be happening. I was appalled, outraged, confused, and disheartened. I went from being strong and independent again, climbing up and down mountains, to needing to be carried up and down the stairs. I became wheelchair-bound. I couldn't walk or leave the house without assistance. As the earth was beginning to stir and awaken from its long winter rest, I was stuck in bed. Life was reasserting itself without me, in buds and hints of green outside. The forsythia bush that I had started from a single cutting was bursting out in yellow blossoms on stark dry branches in front of the gas meter. Unable to walk outside, I could only imagine it. A hint of fragrance from the lilacs in front of the garage drifted into my window and reminded me of warm sun on my arms. I longed for what was as commonplace as stepping outside the door.

Friends became scarce. I didn't blame them. My vibrant, energetic women companions were healthy, fit, active hikers and skiers. I was not able to join them in their adventures now. At first they'd come to visit, but increasingly they made less eye contact when they came by. They could only stay a moment, so many things on their schedule today, appointments and errands. They had to go to yoga or fit in a run. My rhythm was far from theirs: I had nowhere to go. None of them had ever experienced illness, disability or chronic pain. I, on the other hand, appeared to be permanently handicapped. I knew they didn't want to consider what it might be like to be me. I wouldn't have wanted to imagine it either. I triggered their deepest nightmares, representing what they feared the most—I was helpless. Then they stopped coming altogether. The feelings of isolation and loneliness were more difficult to

bear than the wheelchair and the loss of my active life.

I started bargaining with God: *Just around the house, I begged. I'll forego trips to melting glaciers, abandon dreams of sparkling lakes, give up treks to pyramids surging up from verdant Mayan jungles. Just let me make it to the kitchen.*

I'll give up swimming on ocean currents, galloping on unbridled mares, my hair flying in wildness. Just let me just climb the stairs.

I'll do without soaring, snow-laden mountain peaks, their presence beyond words, labels, thoughts, beliefs. Just let me stand by myself and chop onions. Just let me walk to the bathroom alone.

Months passed. Nothing helped. I went to the Mayo Clinic. They said I had fibromyalgia. They offered pain medication. It didn't bring relief. I was weary of doctors, healers and false hopes. I got angry. I grieved and I cried for days. I stayed in bed.

Once again, I was forced to realize that the way in was the way out. I began practicing meditation and sensing for four hours each day. I remembered an experiment we had worked on in one of Charlotte Selver's classes. She had given us bags loosely filled with sand and instructed us to lift them very slowly, "one grain of sand at a time." Then we were to lower the bags with the same meticulous attention, noticing the sensation of the weight, how it shifted, and how that affected us overall. Charlotte had suggested that we investigate whether we were "doing anything that was extra"—clenching our teeth, holding our breath, tightening our stomach muscles unnecessarily.

I recalled that in the back of my closet I actually had some bags of sand I'd used with my students. I got out of bed and wheeled over to the closet. Down on my hands and knees, I rummaged around until I found one. I had

sewn it out of my father's old blue pajamas. The fabric was grainy cotton. As I touched it, a sweet image arose in my mind of him sitting in his favorite chair in those pajamas, reading the newspaper. The memory warmed me.

Back in bed I started my investigation by playing with the sandbag, squeezing and tossing it from hand to hand. It was cool and the sand shifted under my fingers with the slightest touch. Then I raised and lowered the bag slowly for about ten minutes feeling what happened in me. Muscles engaged in my hand, arm, shoulder, belly and back in response to the weight. Though the bag weighed less than a pound, a remarkable amount of inner activity came into play from this simple action. I noticed that my teeth were pressed together tightly and I was holding my breath. I observed how much extra effort I was making. I tried to relax, but the more I tried, the more difficult it seemed.

As I became aware of my own hardness and rigidity, tears welled up and overflowed. I felt the months of forceful striving, pushing myself to doctors and healers. I wept deeply for how much I had been struggling in an attempt to get better, to walk again, hoping and longing for change. The battle was ending. The rigidity in me could begin to soften. My shy heart, held back through all my over-efforting, began peeking out from its stone encasement.

In directly experiencing gravity throughout my anatomy, I was working with a quality that is un-nameable. "Depth" is perhaps the closest I can come. Intellectually I know that on the most fundamental and basic level, I exist as

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perhaps the closest
I can come.*

weight and mass, drawn downward by the force of gravity. But as my body woke up, I could actually feel myself in relationship to the elemental force that shapes everything in nature. Gravity is the glue that holds the moon to the earth, binds the planets to the sun, shifts the tides, and causes stars and galaxies to spin in harmony throughout the universe. Directly sensing this force in my own body called forth my heart and opened it in compassion.

PRACTICE

GRAVITY- FEELING THE PULL

We live within the earth's gravitational field, but we rarely are aware of this powerful force.

- ◉ Reach out and mindfully pick up any small object that might be close to you right now. It might be a glass of water or this book.
- ◉ Can you feel the influence of gravity pulling the object down to the earth?
- ◉ What muscles engage in you to hold it?
- ◉ Now set the object down, and notice the force of gravity acting through you.
- ◉ Can you feel the weight of your arms?
- ◉ Can you feel the weight of your head?
- ◉ The next time you walk up stairs, feel which muscles engage to lift your weight.
- ◉ When you walk down stairs, feel how your weight drops as you take each step.

At last I knew I had done everything I could to heal myself, and it wasn't up to me anymore. My job wasn't to fix my legs. My job was to accept this new life. I was not going to walk again. It simply was what it was. I found tremendous relief in letting go of needing life to be other than it was. An unexpected, deep contentment arose. I had found again the freedom of surrender. Over the years I would have to seek for and find it many more times, but each letting go into the truth of things as they are is a release of suffering. This doesn't mean giving up and feeling helpless. It means arriving home in myself, in life, empowered by the truth.

That day working with the sandbags revealed another way I was holding back from the truth. I saw that I'd been carrying an unconscious belief that not being able to walk indicated I had done something wrong. Perhaps I hadn't taken care of myself well enough. Or maybe I really was defective—I must be bad and was being punished. As I recognized and let go of these thoughts and assumptions, surrendered again to things as they are, I arrived in a deeper understanding. *This condition is me. It is not something that is happening to me, it's me happening. It's mine to face, from me to me.* I turned more intently into my practices, and they pointed me to a larger picture—I am only an infinitesimal part of a vast dazzling universal dance, living the process of life's unfolding.

*I am only an
infinitesimal part
of a vast dazzling
universal dance,
living the process
of life's unfolding*

I turned to my practice of metta, sending lovingkindness to myself and others. I tried to bring kind attention and compassion to each and every place of hurt or pain inside me. Over the next weeks, the kindness began to seep

*I am only an
infinitesimal part
of a vast dazzling
universal dance,
living the process
of life's unfolding.*

into me and touch painful places I still carried from my past—childhood places of self-loathing and contempt that were like stones that had been buried for eons. That pain hadn't gone away, it had just gone underground, covered by knots in my shoulders and tightness in my jaws and tension in my stomach. There is a saying, "Once we feel it, we can heal it." I discovered it was more accurate to say, "When I attend to it with kindness, it heals itself." When I approached the wounds with caring and compassion, they released naturally on their own, usually in a flood of tears.

*When the wounds
were contacted
with kindness,
they released
naturally on their
own, usually in a
flood of tears.*

I went through boxes of tissues as my compassion began to return. My heart was opening to my own suffering—and to the suffering of others.

I remembered a woman I'd met on that Sensory Awareness retreat in Barra de Navidad. Tony was a soft-spoken, Mexican woman with full lips, a loving smile, brown curly hair, and warm clear brown eyes that looked intensely into you. She is one of the most loving women I've ever met. When Tony was in her twenties, she'd been married and had two young children. She was intelligent, attractive, and had a successful career as a parachutist in Mexico City. She'd received many awards and been acclaimed as the champion parachutist in the country. Then there was an accident.

Tony was jumping in a demonstration for the President of Mexico when her parachute didn't open. She fell. She

survived. She spent three bitter, angry years on her back in the hospital, unable to move. Her husband left her; her children were given to relatives to raise; her resources dried up. When I met Tony at that Sensory Awareness workshop, she was paralyzed from the neck down, quadriplegic for life. She had a little movement in the second finger of her right hand. At the end of the retreat, Tony said in a soft, clear voice, “If I had to trade who I was back then for who I am right now as a result of my accident, I wouldn’t do it.” Tony’s words shook up some basic arrangement in my mind. I couldn’t comprehend what life must be like for her, yet her words had rung with truth spoken from a profound and heartfelt place.

Now here I was, facing my own challenges and limitations—and having to learn how to be happy in circumstances that seemed intolerable, to find ways in which my new wheelchair life was not only acceptable but enriching. The Buddha taught that there are two kinds of suffering: the suffering that leads to more suffering, and

There are two kinds of suffering: the suffering that leads to more suffering, and the suffering that leads to the end of suffering.

The Buddha

the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. I was discovering the suffering that leads to the end of suffering.



I began to offer Sensory Awareness classes and Insight Meditation retreats specifically for people who were dealing with chronic illness and chronic pain. At the beginning of the first group, we sat in a large circle and passed around a stone, each person talking about what they were going

through. When they all had spoken, I asked, “What sensations can you notice inside you right in this moment?” I listened as they discovered the felt sense in their bodies. Then I invited them to begin to move, in any way they could. Those who weren’t able to stand moved in their chairs “Let your story move through you,” I encouraged. “Tell your story wordlessly through movement. Explore what movement wants to happen.”

Later, as they shared what happened in that process, we passed around boxes of tissues. The most painful experience in most cases was not the illness but rather the emotional pain and the stories and beliefs that accompanied it.

*I abandon myself.
I desert myself at
a time when
I need myself the
most.*

Lilith slumped in her chair. Dark crescents shadowed the skin under her eyes. She had Lyme disease. “No one can really understand what is happening. I feel farther and farther removed from my friends. As they withdraw, I abandon myself. I desert myself at a time when I need myself the most.” She looked down at the floor and continued. “The sickness makes me miserable and wears me down. I am at my worst. My heart hardens around pain. There is only so much my friends and family can take.”

Joyce, a middle-aged woman with curly black hair began speaking. Her voice was faint and quiet. It seemed to come from a far off place. We had to lean forward to hear her, and the air in the room became charged as she spoke. “I have three children, two boys and a girl, all are under the age of ten.” She paused for a long time then said simply into the space, “I have pancreatic cancer. It is stage four. I will have to leave them. They will grow up without me. No one can understand what this means to me.”

Jill shared that she struggled with a constant backache. “I’m just feeling sorry for myself,” she said. “Other people are worse off than I am.” I felt a tenderness for her arise inside me. I’d had those beliefs myself. I looked at her with compassion. “On the contrary,” I said, “feel your hardship. Hold your sorrow in a tender way, even if it seems small and insignificant. Even if you think you shouldn’t be feeling it, you still do, and it still hurts.”

Roger was tall and thin, in his forties, with intense blue eyes and blond hair pulled back in a pony-tail. “I have rheumatoid arthritis,” he began. “I can’t use my hands. Even picking up a glass brings on a great deal of pain.” His voice caught. He swallowed and went on. “One night when I was fourteen years old, I snuck out of the house while everyone was sleeping. I backed my father’s black Buick out of the driveway and drove to meet my friend, Dave. We went downtown to hear a band. I was turning into a parking space, but I cut the wheel too soon and hit a parked Oldsmobile. The owner was standing on the curb. He called the police. They took me to the station and called my father. When we got home, my dad took off his brown leather belt and whipped me. He told me how I had sinned and would be punished. He was right. I did sin, and because I sinned, I am being punished.”

We sat in silence, startled by his conclusion. I paused, remembering how I had believed the same thing about myself. Not knowing where to start, I decided to lead a guided forgiveness meditation. I began by saying, “Many of us suppose that we can’t make mistakes, and if we do, we are bad. Forgiving ourselves implies being willing to admit that we are all imperfect human beings, doing our best. Every one of us acts unskillfully at times. We all make

mistakes.” I looked around the room at the heads nodding in understanding and continued. “A Chinese proverb says, ‘The only perfectly good people are either dead or unborn.’” That got a few smiles. “Forgiveness for ourselves means we can see the messy shadowy human parts of ourselves and accept them.” Then I invited everyone to reflect on some phrases I would offer, and to consider if any of them were meaningful to him or her. If they were, they were encouraged to repeat them to themselves. The phrases included:

I forgive myself for assuming that I have to be perfect in order to be okay.

I forgive myself for believing the thought, “I am not good enough.”

I forgive myself for not accepting myself just as I am.

I forgive myself for acting in ways that have caused harm to myself or others.

I forgive myself for believing the thought, “I am not good enough.”

I finished the meditation by saying, “Forgiveness takes courage and humility.” I looked over at the man who thought he was being punished. He was lying on the floor with eyes closed. A tear ran down towards his left ear. He quickly brushed it away and turned to face the wall. Then his shoulders started to shake and some muffled sobs escaped. The rest of us sat wordlessly witnessing his sorrow . . . and its passing.

There were similar themes in many of the stories. We all felt isolation and loss—loss of health, of former ways of life, of energy, loss of capability and loss of identity. We

all felt dreadfully alone. Intense emotions arose: grief for what was lost, anger and rage about what was happening, terror that it would always be this way or get worse. We decided that before meeting again, they would reflect on how they could use their afflictions as a way to connect more deeply with an embodied sense of presence. We'd had a good start. In the last few minutes of class, I guided them back again into the direct experience of sensation. They all looked a little more grounded as they left the class.

The next week one woman, who had sat in silence the week before, shared that her careful investigation that week had taught her that there was a great deal of information and teaching that she couldn't get anywhere else except by personally wrestling with her own demons. The man with rheumatoid arthritis told us that he realized he had been closed emotionally to his wife for eleven years—he had resented her good health and energy while he suffered. He also touched a heavy sadness that he wasn't able to do things for her in a way that expressed his love. When he told her how vulnerable and helpless he had felt, they both cried, holding each other and reconnecting with tender caring feelings that had been buried for years. Another woman said she was learning to meet pain with kindness and compassion . . . her own and that of others.

Looking around the room at all these tender and courageous human beings, I shared a little of my own story and what I had learned. I closed by telling them that my deepest realization had been that my salvation was my heart's connection to the present moment. And then we all sat in tender silence, breathing together in embodied presence, in the one and only precious moment.



CHAPTER 7

BREATH AND DEATH

The human form is won with great difficulty, it is easy to lose. All worldly things are brief, like lightning in the sky; This life you must know as the tiny splash of a raindrop; A thing of beauty that disappears even as it comes into being. Therefore set your aspiration, make use of every day and night to achieve it.

Lama Tsong Kapa, 14th Century Tibetan Scholar

The word “spirit” comes from Latin, *spiritus*, which in its original meaning refers not only to spirit but also to *breath*. In Hebrew the word *ruach* also means both the breath and the spirit that exists in all living things. This spirit, as the poet Rabindranath Tagore puts it, is the same stream of life that dances through our bloodstream and flows through every blade of grass. This *spiritus* causes the blossoms to burst open in the spring. It exists in the reciprocity between plants that take in carbon dioxide and give off oxygen for animals to breathe. To breathe is to be alive, and everything alive is breathing.

Breathing and what is known as “life force” are inextricably interdependent. The yogis call this underlying force *prana*. The ancient Chinese called it *chi*. However, to try to name whatever this is diminishes it . . . or over-inflates

it, as if it is something supernatural and outside of ordinary experience. This force is indeed astonishing and remarkable, while at the same time it is the most commonplace occurrence

To breathe is to be alive, and everything alive is breathing.

in our lives. This breath, this life force, comes in with us at birth and leaves us at death. During the miracle of our lifetime learning how to pay attention to our breath is one of the most liberating practices we can do, as revealed in Insight Meditation and Sensory Awareness. For this reason I have also made the breath, this simple tool of transformation, an important part of my psychotherapy practice.

Frowning and slightly out of breath, Vicki arrived for her first therapy appointment with me. Her black T-shirt and tight blue jeans made her seem much younger than the 50+ she had recorded on her intake form. Vicki started talking even before she sat down. Two weeks earlier, after 28 years of marriage, her husband had walked into the kitchen while she was cooking eggs for breakfast and announced abruptly that he was moving out and wanted a divorce. Vicki was shocked. This was entirely unexpected.

She sat down in the middle of my office couch, picked up one of the striped throw-pillows, and wrapped her arms around it. With her chest sunken inward and her shoulders pulled forward, she looked very small. I could see that her breath was shallow and high in her upper chest. Tucking a light brown, shoulder-length curl behind her right ear, she said softly she had never considered that she would grow old without her husband. Gazing down at the carpet, she went on. Her youngest daughter had left for college a year ago, and now this. "I feel let down and abandoned by everyone and everything." Vicki looked up at

me and asked, “What can I trust?” It was a good question. I sat with her in silence, feeling the heaviness of her heart.

What *can* we trust? We often live with the unconscious assumption that the circumstances of our lives won’t change. But is there anyone who won’t ever leave us, by choice or by death? Is our job certain? Our health? Can we trust our bodies? Do they ask for our permission to get sick, or grow old and weak, or die? Can we even trust our own minds? Do our private thoughts reveal the truth? Or do they flit around making false promises to us? Our memory is at best selective and often distorted. And when we look carefully, we can see that our beliefs and assumptions are conditioned by the circumstances of our lives.

Even our ability to be present is not reliable. When we meditate, we might attempt to follow clear and simple instructions to let our attention rest on the breath. Usually, in less than a few seconds, our fickle minds drift off in search of something more entertaining. One of my favorite quotes comes from Zen master Suzuki Roshi: “What do I trust? I trust my two feet on the ground and my bottom on the cushion.” Vicki’s question was going right to the core of her situation, to the core of the truth we all live with.

*Is your body
trusting the
support offered to
you right now?*

I broke the silence. “Vicki, would you allow me to guide you into your direct experience of this moment?” She lifted a vacant gaze toward me and slowly nodded her head. I explained that I would ask her a few questions, not to elicit a verbal response but to point her to her sensory experience. Then I invited her to let her eyelids close. “Can you feel yourself being supported by the sofa?” I asked. “Is your body trusting the support offered to you right now?” After a pause, I added, “Are you able to be present

for whatever is happening inside you in *this* moment—not whether you like it or not, not whether what you are encountering is pleasant or unpleasant, but just having faith in your ability to allow what is occurring?”

After a minute, I asked Vicki to notice what sensations she was feeling in her eyes. Then in her shoulders. As we sat together in silence, I could see her breath getting even more shallow and more labored. Suddenly, she opened her eyes wide, looked straight at me and said, “I’m afraid.” Gently I asked her to tell me about the fear. She replied, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to breathe.”

Vicki went on to tell me that as a child she had been allergic to cats, and she had just remembered a time when she was eleven years old and was spending the night at a girlfriend’s house. Her friend’s cat had been lying on the pillow Vicki was supposed to sleep on. She didn’t think about it, but when they got into bed that night and turned off the lights, her chest started tightening. The air in her lungs felt thick and heavy, and breathing was getting more and more difficult. She remembered lying in the dark, feeling ashamed and trying to cover up what was happening. She started to wheeze and then to gasp out loud. Her alarmed girlfriend ran to tell her mother, who called Vicki’s parents. They arrived minutes later and quickly drove her to the hospital.

During her adolescent years, Vicki continued to suffer asthma attacks, which landed her four or five times in the hospital emergency room, fighting for air, feeling a giant weight bearing down on her chest. The asthma went away in her late teens, but the memory had remained locked in her muscles and tissues. So now for Vicki as an adult, breathing itself was threatening and included fear that it might not even be possible.

By the time she left my office that day, Vicki had a sense

that some of the utter desperation she felt over her husband leaving was linked to this basic fear and uncertainty from childhood. The shock and chaos in her life caused by his sudden announcement had been compounded by a pattern established in her youth: *Will I have enough air to breathe? Will I survive?*

I knew from my own experience in meditation and Sensory Awareness training that Vicki's body was remembering a lot more than her mind did. The fear and pain were embedded in her physicality. The memories, locked into her musculature, her breathing, and her movements, had congealed and festered like a splinter that couldn't work itself out. Vicki's husband leaving her had felt like a threat to her survival, and contracting in fear was her only response mechanism. Not surprising that she felt she was on shaky ground.

When Vicki returned the next week, she was still in grief, but the shock had subsided and her eyes were softer. I could see that her breath was originating in her belly and moving more evenly in her ribcage. We talked again about her childhood asthma attacks and the fear she still felt connected with that experience. "It doesn't make sense," she said. "Why should I still let that old panic and fear drive me?" I explained to her that although she had not experienced an asthma attack in 40 years, her body still held the belief that she could not trust her own breath to sustain her life.

"Do you feel safe enough right now to further investigate breathing?" I asked. Vicki nodded and closed her eyes again. "Just begin by feeling each breath as it enters and leaves your body," I began. "Can you begin to notice how breathing itself changes? Don't do anything yourself to try to change the breath. Simply bring a conscious attention to what is actually happening." We sat in silence as Vicki engaged in this non-judgmental inner exploration.

When I first learned about working with the breath, the teaching was not at all about this simple process of allowing. My first yoga teacher had introduced me to the connection between breath and the unconscious. “Breath is influenced by our thoughts, emotions, moods and attitudes,” she had said. “This also happens in reverse: When breathing changes, so does our mind-state.” We were introduced to classical yogic breathing techniques. I accomplished holding my breath for over a minute, and I became skilled at *kapalabhati*, a form of rapid breathing to alter my state of consciousness. Alternate nostril breathing gave me a feeling of composure and helped me sleep better.

But later, with Joseph Goldstein in meditation and Charlotte Selver in Sensory Awareness, I was introduced to the breath from an entirely different standpoint. Instead of changing the way we breathed, we were to explore the natural organic breath as it presents itself in any moment. I saw that the natural breath was changing all the time, in relationship not only to activities I was engaged in but also to mind states and thoughts. While the basic understanding was the same, Joseph and Charlotte were teaching a way to relate to the breath that was exactly the opposite of managing the breath in yoga practices. That superimposed layer of control in yogic breathing had only strengthened my already strong inclination to want to manipulate my mood and my life when I didn’t like how circumstances were unfolding.

By just observing and allowing, I learned to “dance” with the breath and to let it lead me. My job was simply to follow it. This often required patience, but if I was able to stay attentive and friendly with breathing and genuinely allow myself to feel what *it* wanted to do, invariably I arrived in a more balanced mental state.

Our inclination is to move away from discomfort or pain, try to fix it or make it go away so we can feel better.

As Vicki continued observing her breath in silence, I pointed out, “No matter what is arising in your body and mind, just allow it to be there.” Our inclination is to contract from emotions and sensations that are uncomfortable or painful. We try to fix them or make them go away so we can feel better. While pain in our body can be an indication that something needs healing attention, opening into what is unpleasant, just allowing it to be whatever it is, with a sense of curiosity, is often a necessary part of the healing path.

When I asked Vicki what she was noticing, she reported that she could feel herself “efforting” to pull air in. I encouraged her to stay with that feeling of pulling, and just to observe precisely how this was happening in her. “Remember, you’re not trying to make your experience any different from what it is.”

When constrictions in our body become conscious and are allowed to be as they are, we discover that they often are linked to holding our emotion and our melodrama intact. Simply remaining present, without trying to change our experience, allows the contractions to release and change on their own. As the tightness diminishes, we are freed from imprisonments of the past.

After three or four more inhalations and exhalations, Vicki’s breathing shifted. Her shoulders dropped. Her elbows, which had been pressing into her sides, moved outward and her arms hung more freely. Tears began to slowly trickle down her face, and she began to cry. Soon crying gave way to sobbing, and Vicki abandoned herself fully to grief. Her shoulders shook. Her breath moved

rapidly in her belly. She bent forward and her head sank into her hands. Her entire body wept for about three or four minutes. Then, in a seamless transition, the energy that had begun as crying transformed, and suddenly Vicki was laughing, with a fullness as deep and robust as the crying had been. I found myself spontaneously laughing with her, and we both felt the joy of her deep release.

When this beautiful process had completed itself, Vicki looked up at me, her eyes clear and direct. “Most of my life I have been trying to keep myself safe from fears of unforeseen disasters.” Her voice was steady and slow, and I noticed it had more res-

*Most of my life I
have been trying
to keep myself
safe from fears
of unforeseen
disasters.*

onance. Her breath had moved to her belly. We both could see that something deep in her had changed.

The next week Vicki walked into my office slowly and with a noticeable ease. Her back was straight, and she seemed taller. She reported that she felt more confident—not in how things might or might not turn out but in her own ability to deal with whatever might arise. The world felt safer now to her. She realized that asking, “What can I trust?” had been based on the belief that some event or circumstance would develop in the future to keep her safe. Her question now had become: “Am I able to trust this moment? Am I in a state of trust? Can I connect with the dimension of reality that is trust itself?” By allowing herself to contact her own natural breath, Vicki had found her way back into life, into inhabiting this new fresh present moment more fully, and trusting that the future would unfold in its own mysterious way. Though she still had challenges to face, she now had a readily accessible tool with which to meet them.

Attention focused on the natural process of breathing

The present moment is not just a sliver between the past and the future but a dimension in which the past and future don't even exist.

reveals to us how breath, body, emotions and thoughts are intimately interconnected. Sustained attention to them shifts our attention out of conceptual thought into a reality that is not colored by future planning or past reminiscing or fantasies and imaginings. The present moment is not just a sliver between the past and the future but a dimension in which the past and future don't even exist. When we visit this immediacy, we are connected and genuinely alive. That in itself carries us more gracefully to our last moment's departing breath, as Deanne, another of my clients, would come to realize.

PRACTICE

Let yourself settle comfortably, then practice the following for four or five breaths.

- ⊙ Feel the moment when an inhalation begins.
- ⊙ Feel the duration of inhalation.
- ⊙ Feel the last moment of inhalation.
- ⊙ Feel the moment when inhalation changes to exhalation.
- ⊙ Feel the very beginning of exhalation.
- ⊙ Feel the duration of exhalation.
- ⊙ Feel the end of the exhalation.
- ⊙ Feel the pause after exhalation.
- ⊙ Wait quietly until the next breath arises. Notice the experience of letting breathing breathe itself.



Deanne walked into my office and collapsed on the side of the sofa farthest away from me. She seemed listless and distant, and as if she could have been anywhere. Staring vacantly through the window, she related in a flat voice that she had been single for eight years, her daughter Julie had left home two years ago for college, and she was having a sixth reoccurrence of ovarian cancer. “This time,” she said with certainty, “will be the last bit of my life.” After pausing for what seemed like a long minute, Deanne focused her green eyes directly on me and asked, “Would you be with me in my dying process?” I was startled by this direct question from her after she’d seemed so aloof and disengaged. But I felt honored by her request. “It would be a privilege,” I replied.

The thing that was bothering her most, Deanne went on, was that she did not have a husband or a lover with whom to share this huge transition. She said, with little emotion, “If only I had someone to be close to and intimate with on a daily basis, then I would be happy.” My heart felt heavy for her. Here was this woman, alone and feeling lonely, facing the last few months of her life, and feeling bereft of any significant connection to anything or anyone.

I leaned forward, “What are you aware of in your body right now, Deanne?”

She looked down, almost as if surprised that she had a body down there somewhere. “Nothing.”

“Is nothing a numb feeling or a feeling of empty space or no feeling at all?”

“A feeling of numbness.”

“Could you investigate that sensation of being numb in more detail? Is it a frozen feeling . . . or maybe a sense of heaviness?”

Deanne closed her eyes and was silent for some time. “There is a sense of weightiness,” she said. After a few moments she added, “The heaviness is in my arms and chest, and my breathing feels labored when I inhale.”

I continued to guide and encourage her to drop into her felt-sense with more precision. As with Vicki, I hoped that being present with her breath could allow Deanne to come home to herself, to her own life. As we sat together in silence, tears started to roll down her cheeks in a rivulet that grew and then gushed in sobs of sadness. When she looked up at me again, the storm had passed and her complexion had acquired a peachy tone. Her eyes were brighter. She said she felt more peaceful than she had in a year. Before Deanne left, I invited her to come to a weekly meditation group that I led, and she agreed.

Sunday morning Deanne arrived early for the group and picked a chair in the back. I began the meditation instructions, thinking especially of her, knowing the difference this practice could make for her, hoping it might resonate and become her support. “Breath is key,” I began. “Breath is central to living and connected to everything we do.” Seeing the group begin to settle in, I went on. “Let your attention rest in breathing. Don’t force it. Don’t hinder it. Don’t try to change anything. Let it be as it is.” After a few minutes of silence, I picked up the instructions again: “Return to your breath when your mind wanders. Investigate each breath. Examine closely each inhalation and exhalation. This sounds simple but is amazingly profound and leads

us where we need to go.” Deanne sat silently and seemed attentive. She slipped out quietly after the class without talking to anyone.

When she came in for her next therapy appointment, Deanne said that she wanted to continue meditating daily as well as attending the meditation class. I was happy to hear this. “When you’re meditating, please continue to notice when your mind drifts off. Then gently direct your attention back to the breath.” When she returned the following week, Deanne shared how hard it was to keep her mind from jumping into thoughts about the future. “But the meditation practice calmed me overall,” she said, “and I have a feeling there is much more to it than that.” I nodded my head in agreement.

I continued seeing Deanne weekly, working with her each time we met to deepen her attention to her breathing. About a month into our work together she reported that the cancer was progressing, and she was beginning to feel pain in her legs when she walked. She’d started spending more time in bed, acutely feeling a loss of energy. At our next appointment she told me she especially missed walking in the mountains. “I have taken my legs for granted. If only I could walk out in the forest and smell the deep musky scent of fall leaves, then I would be happy.” I too loved fall in the mountains, and so what she said touched me deeply. I invited her to hold her loss with tenderness and kindness.

Since Deanne was drawn to meditation, I encouraged her to meditate lying down whenever she needed to. In our subsequent sessions, she started to report that her mind remained more focused now at times. One day she came in and related a realization that brought her deep

comfort. “The breath doesn’t belong to me,” she smiled. “It’s more like an intimate friend who is visiting. It keeps me company.”

As Deanne weakened, I started going to visit her in her home. One day when I arrived, she looked very distraught. Her brown hair was not combed, and the top bed-sheet lay crumpled on the floor. Her pajamas were missing a button. Her bloodshot eyes darted restlessly around the room. The air in the room was stuffy. Her daughter had visited but had left the previous day to return to work and her active life in New York.

I perched on a chair next to her bed and rested my feet on the bed frame. Deanne said, “If only my daughter would just come back home and live here with me, sleep in her bed at night, then I would be happy. It is so hard to just accept things as they are.”

“Would you be willing to experiment with breathing right now?” I asked. Deanne agreed and squeezed her eyelids shut; I could see her eyes jerking behind them. “Can you feel what is holding, tightening, inside you right now?” I asked. “When you find a place that feels contracted, just notice it, simply let it remain the way it is. Rather than trying to change or fix it in any way, let yourself be curious and investigate the contraction more carefully.” I explained that if she felt some contraction that wanted to get tighter, she should allow that. If it seemed to be releasing on its own, she was to let it change.

I asked her if she understood the difference between making something happen versus following “what wanted to happen.” Deanne opened her eyes and said that question reminded her of teaching clay modeling to second graders. She’d often directed her students to let the clay

guide them to what it wanted to become. “It is the same, exactly,” I said. “Let the sensations guide you.”

I watched as her breath began to slow down. Her eyelids softened and relaxed, and I could see that her eyes had stopped moving behind her eyelids. Her exhalation grew longer. Before I left, Deanne told me that she was feeling much more content and peaceful. I suggested that her homework for that week would be to pay even closer attention to some of the more subtle nuances of the breath, and particularly to notice if she was manipulating the breath in any way.

On my next visit, I noticed a change as soon as I came in. The room was in order. Deanne was sitting up in bed. Fresh air wafted in through an open window. The blankets were pulled up neatly over her legs. Her face looked serene and her hair was pulled back and held with a tie. She was smiling and said she was happy to see me. She wanted to share an important insight that had come to her while meditating.

“I was lying down with my attention resting on breathing when suddenly I became aware that I was restricting the flow of inhalation by subtly pressing in my sinuses. It wasn’t comfortable so I started to relax, to let the air flow more freely. But then I remembered what you’d said about ‘not fixing’ what was uncomfortable. So I let that tightening be there and just stayed aware of it.”

I watched as Deanne’s breath released in an easy exhale. She went on, reporting that then she’d started to notice little details of what was actually happening. “At one point the breath wanted to stop entirely. I followed the inclination and allowed it. After a long pause, my lungs expanded and breath came in on its own accord.

I wasn't breathing. It breathed. Breathing breathed itself. It was the sweetest inhalation I could remember ever having felt. I wasn't breathing. *It* breathed. Breathing breathed itself." Deanne lifted her eyes to meet my gaze and her voice softened. "It was so full and pure. It doesn't sound like much, but it included a sense of ease that didn't try one bit. It didn't need anything. It didn't want anything. It was perfectly complete."

At last there were no longer any "if only's"; there was only air entering and leaving. In allowing the breath to come and go and accept it, as it was, whatever it was doing, Deanne was developing the capacity to allow all that came to her, and would come, including her final breath. During the last few weeks of life, Deanne found a peace and acceptance that she had never known before.

And her daughter did return to be with her. An old friend also arrived to care for her with deep and genuine tenderness. Near the end, I went to sit with the three of them. Deanne was very thin and frail. Her face was grey. She smiled weakly and said softly to us, "My visitor, my friend, the breath, is ready to go now." We sat holding her as breathing stopped and the life in her gently departed.

When the breath becomes our most intimate friend, paradoxically we experience it also as an impersonal energy that comes and goes in us. The same is true of life itself. When we engage in it fully and most intimately, we also recognize that our life and our death are simply part of an ongoing process. Inhalation is followed by exhalation, right through to the acceptance of our final breath.



One night I had a dream that Death came to visit. It was sweet actually. He offered his still certainty for final release. “It’s only me.” he said gently, “I’ve always been here. Don’t bother getting up. I come for everyone. It’s nothing special. There’s nothing to fear.”

Every day I am one day older, and every day I have one less to live. Yet it is so difficult to remember this. One of the Five Remembrances offered by the Buddha as a way to awaken from denial and attachment goes like this: “There is no way to escape death. One day I will die. This is human life. I cannot avoid it. Death comes to everyone, and it will come to me.” My predominant unconscious assumption is usual-

*There is no way
to escape death.
One day I will die.
This is human life.
I cannot avoid it.
Death comes to
everyone, and it
will come to me.*

ly that my future is some God-given eternity. Ordinarily I go about my existence blissfully ignorant of the fragility of my life. Even though I know intellectually that the cause of death is birth, it is still hard to fathom that I am a part of the ultimate statistic: ten out of ten of us will die. I have to make a point of remembering that death—and the end of my life of breathing—is the indisputable and staggering truth. And yet it is so difficult to grasp.

*Ten out of ten of
us will die.*

One day my mother called, obviously caught up in denial. “Your father is not well. I just don’t understand it,” she said. “I took him to the doctor’s last week, and they can’t determine what is wrong. I am going to tell them to take more tests so they can figure out what is going on.” Dad was 94.

“I’ll catch the first plane and be there tomorrow,” I said.

She met me at the door. She didn’t say hello. She simply continued the conversation we had commenced on the phone as if a day hadn’t passed. “He won’t get out of bed. It’s not good for him to just lie there. He has to get up. Try to get him to get up.”

My father was dying. It was blazingly clear. He had been growing weaker and frailer for several years, but sadly, Mom was refusing to accept what was obvious to everyone else. I sat down on a chair next to his bed and placed my arm around his chest. My head touched his. We breathed in unison. I remembered the unbridled joy I’d felt as a young child when he walked in the door at night. “Daddy’s home!” Underneath the confusion and despair that often accompanies alcohol, affairs and family secrets, we still had love. He treasured me. I worshiped him. Big love. And that bond beyond time still connected us. It was here, in this room.

Three days later, when life ebbed out of his body and he breathed his last breath, my mother sat in disbelief and shock. “Why couldn’t the doctors save him? What did they do wrong?” But for me, however, there was no denial. When Daddy died, I finally knew that I too would die. And I knew that everyone I know would be dead in 100 years, and most a lot sooner. Being in the presence of Death reminded me to wake up to the preciousness of all the moments of life. The Buddha said, “Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world: a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream; a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.” I knew more fully how ephemeral my own life is.

That was brought home to me again one day when Dennis and I went to the funeral for his uncle. The service was in a small, picturesque country church on a hillside, and afterwards we meandered through the adjacent cemetery, looking at the family names and dates engraved on the headstones: 1894-1954, 1903-1967, 1889-1949. I calculated their ages at death and compared them to my own to deduce how long I might have. Who had these people been? What were their lives like? What is left of them? Their names engraved here. Their birth date, a dash, and the year they died. Their whole life was summed up in that dash.

“That’s where I am,” I gasped. “I’m in the dash.”

Every day in this fleeting world,
I try to remember to ask myself:
Am I really living my life or am I
just moving through time waiting
for the next date on my gravestone?
Feeling the movement of the breath
in my lungs, sensing the weight of
my mass supported by the earth—
this is how I live my life fully, in the
body, breath by breath.

*Am I really living
my life or am
I just moving
through time
waiting for the
next date on my
gravestone?*



CHAPTER 8

EMBODIED PRESENCE IN HELL

Mindfulness in the body is one's best friend.
Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant

The Buddha acknowledged that pain in life is inevitable. But when a person in pain reacts in the typical way, he or she “sorrows, grieves, laments . . . becomes distraught,” only adding to the discomfort. In describing how we increase our own suffering, he said it’s as if we were shot by an arrow and then immediately shot by a second arrow. When we react to pain with fear, anger, or unwholesome attempts to escape or deny it, we are shooting ourselves with that second arrow, increasing and perpetuating our suffering. As the popular saying goes, “Pain is inevitable but suffering is optional.” Pain is a sensation, and suffering arises in our reaction to it. The way out, the Buddha taught, is to pay careful attention to our bodily sensations and how we react to them.

In the *Kayagatasati Sutta* the Buddha talks about the refuge that is available through mindfulness in the body. He calls the tormenting demon in our minds “Mara” and says: “Just like a heavy stone ball can penetrate a mound of wet clay, just like a fire can be produced from dry wood,

just like an empty jug can be filled with water, so too will Mara, the master of delusion, the evil one, find an opportunity to overpower those who are not well established in Mindfulness in the Body.” With mindfulness of sensation, the mind “gathers and settles inwardly, grows unified and centered,” and Mara “gains no entry.”

In those poignant times when I have faced critical challenges, when pain—emotional or physical—could have become suffering, remembering mindfulness of the body has indeed been a refuge. Embodied presence awakened the wisdom and compassion that could guide me through what otherwise might have been traumatizing situations. My kinesthetic sense anchored me in the immediacy of the moment, and I could discover a deeper understanding and clarity.

*When I have faced
critical challenges,
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or physical—
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refuge.*



I’d had a horrendous nightmare. My body was still shaking, and the images were vivid in my mind. I reached for my notebook and pen, feeling compelled to record the details, as if that might release me from its horror.

I was walking through Four Realms of Hell. The first three were filled with madness. People with red, fevered eyes, glazed with hunger, were wandering aimlessly everywhere. I was aware of the sickening smell of decaying corpses and people in the distance screaming, “Help me! Someone, please, help me!” Disembodied arms grabbed at my shirt as I walked by. In each realm I saw people I knew.

As I passed through Realm One, all of my friends turned away from me with disgust. I felt like an invisible outcast.

In Realm Two, my husband confessed that he had been lying to me for 15 years and was still married to his ex-wife. I found a close friend in that realm and also my daughter-in-law, and I helped them to escape.

In Realm Three my legs developed bleeding sores and fell off, but in the dream I managed to go on.

Realm Four was filled with bottomless despair, loneliness and confusion. I couldn't enter, but I could see into it. It was crammed with bodies packed tightly against each other: creatures that were human but, at the same time, less-than-human, writhing and thrashing in a contorted mass. The screeching and howling arising from the chaos was deafening.

A ghastly creature with sickly yellow eyes gaped at me. He twisted toward another monstrous thing to his right, and his deformed hand began clawing at his neighbor's eyes, gouging them out. Blood dripped from the empty sockets. Then the creature turned its clawed hand against itself and began mauling its own face, the deep scratches oozing blood. Another grisly, freakish thing with fangs pressed forward, pushing down and stepping on a whimpering form whose lips were trembling in desperation, pleading, "No. Stop." The putrid stench of rotting flesh caused bile to rise in my throat. This Fourth Realm was overflowing with unfathomable abandonment, betrayal, confusion and incomprehensible horror. I was witnessing tremendous terror, isolation, despair and rage, but I was powerless to do anything to help.

I suddenly realized that my daughter Shannon was trapped in this hideous realm, and there was nothing I could do. I didn't know how to get her free or help her in any way. The panic I felt was nauseating.

As I recorded the dream, horror still pounded in my heart. My nightshirt was damp with sweat. I felt limp with helplessness. Throughout that entire day, I continued to feel anxious and distraught.

A few weeks later, a real-life hell realm appeared in my life—and Shannon was in it. I had just finished leading a meditation class when my son-in-law Anthony called. My daughter was in the hospital. She was having trouble breathing. Anthony tried to reassure me, saying that she was getting good care and I shouldn't worry, but his usually composed voice was shaking. The unspoken fact that compounded our concern was that Shannon was six months pregnant.

I had spoken to her a few days before, and she'd been trying to decide if she should get a shot that her doctor recommended, to protect her from the H1N1 virus. She was told that it would not be dangerous to her or the baby, so she decided to go ahead with it. Had that been the cause? At that point the reason didn't matter though. I just had to get to her.

Only by staying present in each micro-moment could I manage to pack my suitcase. I talked to myself gently: *Pick up your toothbrush, Terry. Now put it in your toiletry bag. Sit down. Feel the chair. Feel just this breath. Call the airline.* But when Dennis asked, "What can I do to help?" a profound raw and primal sound emerged from deep in my gut, the likes of which I have never uttered before or since. My knees buckled underneath me as I crumpled to the floor. Dennis managed to get me to the airport, and I was on the next plane.

In the past, before Sensory Awareness, before meditation, I know what I would have done—I would

have reacted with panic, anger, numbing, and chaos. But now I knew my refuge would lie in being embodied, present, grounded in physical sensations. I found my seat on the plane and buckled myself in. Shakiness, the shallowness of the breath, trembling—as they moved and changed in me—were the only truth. Awareness of the constriction in my throat, limiting the amount of air that could enter, became my refuge. I experienced the embodiment of terror. I entered into the panicky, in-between place of not knowing. I stayed with the dreadfulness of the moment as the horror it was. The only ground was groundless. Each time my attention drifted, I had to wake up and come back to the embodied moment. *Just be right here. Just feel this breath. Feel the seat you are sitting on. Don't think. Breathe, don't think.*



Shannon's beautiful pregnant body lay unconscious in the intensive care unit. She looked like she was sleeping. Her fair, angelic face was peaceful. Her skin was lustrous, as if nothing were wrong. A pale-green hospital cap revealed a few wisps of soft light-brown hair. Her belly formed a gentle mound in the sheets. She was attached to a machine that had taken over the job of breathing for her. Her chest rose and fell to its rhythm. A monitor was broadcasting her heart's cadence.

For four and a half days I sat with Anthony and my son Oliver, all of us glued to the measured beeps of the monitors. The monitors, pulsing her existence on earth. With that reminder of the tenuous link to life sounding in the background, my mind wandered back to another bedside scene in another hospital, back to another time when I was forced to gather all of my strength to stay in

each micro-moment of experience, when there was nothing but the embodied presence of the moment to turn to.



My sister had called. “Our brother has really done it this time.” Every time Stephen had made a suicide attempt, she’d called me. Once we’d had to go looking for him, driving around the Western Slope of Colorado, following his trail of credit card charges. That time, the police found him unconscious on the cold cement floor of a closed drive-in storage shed, with his car running. He was resuscitated and then constrained for a while in a state institution. There were several other dramatic attempts that were more violent and gory. So the shock of the news this time had less of an impact, at least when I first heard it.

My agitation increased as I waited in the airport for the first flight available. I struggled to hold myself together as I rode in the taxi from the airport to the hospital. I hurried in, breathing rapidly. There were several attendants at the nursing station. As though in a trance, I spoke his name out loud to no one in particular, then asked, “Which room is he in?” A female RN, scribbling away on a pad, put down her pen and looked over her glasses at me. In a quavering voice I added, “How is he?”

“Are you related to the patient?”

“I’m his sister.”

She frowned, “He’s in pretty bad shape. He is not conscious, but his condition is stable.” She paused to let me take in what she had said, and then warned me: “Don’t look at his face.”

With dread I opened the heavy white door to Stephen’s room and entered. The smell of antiseptic and disinfectant

was strong. I didn't look at his face. I pulled up a chair and sat by his feet. He was breathing solely with the support of a machine. All day, I didn't look at his face. Then I decided I would. I paused first, turning my attention to my breathing and then to noticing that I was sitting on a chair. In that moment, slowly and cautiously, I raised my eyes to see what I didn't want to see.

*I raised my
eyes to see
what I didn't
want to see.*

Nothing could have prepared me for the grotesque sight. He had used a gun this time, in his mouth. He was unrecognizable as my brother. He was unrecognizable as a person. His face didn't look like a face. It was twice the size of a face and was charred almost black. Where his head should have been there was a monstrous ball. A plastic collar attached his neck to a large tube and innumerable smaller tubes. His chin and mouth were replaced by raw meat, the color, texture and shape of hamburger, with black splotches in it. His nose was recognizable as a nose but swollen to a freakish size. There were dried bloody stitches on the left side of his face, trailing down to where his mouth should have been. His eyes were so swollen that even if he had been conscious, he could not have opened them. I went into shock. It was too much to take in, too much to feel. I went numb. I walked to the bathroom and threw up.

Then I did something weird. I took a picture of him. I still have it. I'm not sure why I took it; maybe that was a manner of stepping back, being objective, or perhaps it was my way of trying to hold him here. He was still alive at least. Maybe I did it because I thought it might help me comprehend what I couldn't grasp at the time. I've looked at that photo a few times since and realized that it was

only later, when I had gotten past my own shock and horror, that I could begin to register my brother's unbearable pain and tormented spirit.

I moved my chair to the bottom of his bed and lifted the sheet off his feet. Unlike his distorted and deformed head, I could recognize the shape of his large toes with sprouts of dark hair. This was Stephen. I brought my hands to his cold feet and held them.

A thousand memories rushed in. The pranks we played on our babysitters when our parents went out for the evening, telling them we couldn't find our sister. And sliding down the curved and forbidden staircase banister together, squealing with delight. Our relationship had been complicated. Yes, he had hurt me growing up, but he was my big brother. I had idolized and worshiped him.

Sitting by his feet, my love for him overrode my painful memories. With my hands, I gently embraced one foot. Feeling the touch of his cool skin beneath my warm hands brought my attention back to sitting and breathing. I reconnected with myself. Spontaneously, my long time practice of lovingkindness meditation brought forth the silent words in a heartfelt prayer. *May he be free from suffering, May he be at peace. May all who are suffering be at peace.*

The pulsating monitors surrounded us, their perky, lively chirps as incongruous as a smiley face on a coffin. Throughout the day I sat sentry by his bed, staring at the screens, looking for some sign to answer my questions: *Who is my brother? What happened to him? Where is he now?* How could I understand his unfathomable suffering?

On the evening of the third day, we were informed that Stephen's vegetative state was probably permanent.

His wife made the decision to remove life-support. I was appalled, feeling it was way too early to make that decision. We were all still in shock. The doctors didn't know for sure. They had said *probably* permanent. He would certainly need a lot of care but possibly could improve to some extent. His life force was strong.

I had to remind myself over and over to breathe, to find the sensations in my body, to come back to the present.

I argued. She contended that he would never be normal, and if he did recover he would try to end his life again. I felt horrified, but it was her decision. I felt brushed off and disregarded in the same way I had been as a child. The deluge of emotions that arose in me was agonizing, intense and felt unbearable. I could barely stay present. I had to remind myself over and over to breathe, to find the sensations in my body, to return to the moment. I knew that the confusion, horror and rage I felt would have fallen on deaf ears. I would have to sort it all out later.

A diminutive nurse came into the room and in a very business-like manner removed the many tubes connecting my brother to the various machines sustaining his life. After she left the monitors measuring his vital functions continued chanting their cheerful bleeps. I couldn't believe he was actually dying. *Could that even be possible? Am I actually watching the record of the remainder of his life: lines on a display, sounds from a monitor?* After a timeless time the beeping began to decelerate, and I watched the blips in the line on the screen grow small, then tiny, and then slowly level out until the line was as smooth and unruffled as a body of water on a day with no breeze. An alarm went off, and the same nurse came back and efficiently turned off the screen.

The others in the family left. We were all exhausted, but I couldn't bear to move yet. The room was quiet. My mind came to a standstill. I could feel breath still moving through me. It was astonishing that I was breathing and he was not. I could feel the solid beat of my heart. His had stopped.

After a long while, I stood up and opened the window shades. It was dawn. A car drove into the hospital parking lot, and a woman got out and walked quickly into the building. It was all so surprisingly normal. The rest of the world didn't notice that anything at all had changed. But life had turned upside down for me and would never be the same. The moment's breath was all there was to rely on.



I pulled my attention back to Shannon's room. Breathing. The machines beeping. Sitting in a chair next to her bed. Here was my daughter, who for all I knew was dying. But it couldn't be true. Until that moment I hadn't realized that I had made a deal with God when my kids were born. It went like this: *You can do whatever you want to me, and everyone else I know, and I won't complain, but keep your hands off my kids. They are off limits.* And so I had lived with the unconscious assumption that my children were safe. They had to be. Even the phrase, "Please don't let anything happen to them," was code for the unbearable, intolerable idea that they were susceptible to death. That wasn't part of the agreement. As I sat next to my still and unconscious daughter, I was sure I had kept my end of the bargain. I hadn't complained as I faced the on-going challenges to my own body. God *had* to keep His end of the deal.

I harvested the fruits of decades of practice as I stayed locked into the moment. It was the only place that was workable, each embodied moment, breath by breath.

I sat by her bedside, calling my mind back to presence with each breath and bodily sensation. I harvested the fruits of decades of practice as I stayed locked into the moment. It was the only place that was workable, each embodied moment, breath by breath. Feeling the hard plastic of the hospital chair, the smell of antiseptics, the steady rhythm of the heart monitor's beeping in the silence of the room. My shoulders frozen in fear, my breath shallow, unable to descend lower than my throat. It was as if there were only enough air for one of us in the room, and I wanted her to have it. I prayed to the Lord of Death the timeless prayer of mothers: *If you need a life, take mine.*

I prayed to the Lord of Death the timeless prayer of mothers: If you need a life, take mine.

There was nothing else. All night long. Just each moment and the sensations arising in it. Being with what was immediate, riveted to the sound of the monitors and the ever-present process of breathing, I was able to endure this surrealistic nightmare of time. Slowly I arrived in the middle of my terror. Equanimity somehow began to hold the unthinkable panic and horror, and eventually to let in the terrifying truth that even my children could, and eventually would, die. I could withstand a reality that had felt unbearable.

As dawn eased its way through the windows, I slowly began to understand that the excruciating pain I was feeling was not mine alone but the world's pain. I was one of countless mothers throughout history who have helplessly

sat by and watched a child hanging
by a thread between life and death.
I was part of a long chain of terror
and grief. My body that had been
pregnant with her was also part of
a succession of embodied women:

*The excruciating
pain I was
feeling was not
mine alone, but
the world's pain.*

my mother bearing me, my grandmother bearing her, and so on extending back to the beginning of time. And I was part of a much larger world in which children are born and children die, and our sole recourse is to come home to the only truth there is—the living moment and all that it holds.

On the fifth of those endless, wretched days, her doctor came into the room and said it was time to take her off the life-support systems. This time though it was not as it had been with my brother—not to disconnect her from life but to see if the life force in her was strong enough to sustain itself. Anthony, Oliver and I were ordered to wait outside. After fifteen terrible minutes a nurse came out. “You can go in now,” she smiled. The large tube in Shannon’s throat was gone. My eyes fixed on her chest, and as I watched, it rose slowly, then fell, then rose again. Tears of relief and joy poured down my face. Shannon opened her eyes and managed a weak smile. It imparted a radiance no less than the blessed sun rising. It was surely the most magnificent and wondrous sight that the three of us in the room had ever witnessed. My heart was so full, it felt like it might explode.

We never discovered the origin of Shannon’s sickness; it disappeared as fast as it started. And three months later she presented me with a healthy granddaughter, Jamie Ray. I guess God held up His or Her end of the agreement after all.

PRATICE

R.A.I.N.

The next time you are feeling physical or emotional pain, try to distinguish between pain and suffering by using this version of a simple practice called R.A.I.N.

- ⊙ **Recognize** that you are in pain. Without judgment simply acknowledge the thoughts, emotions and feelings associated with the pain.
- ⊙ **Accept** that pain is a part of all life. Understand that it is not bad or a mistake. Allow it to be here.
- ⊙ **Investigate** the pain. Where are you feeling it in your body? What are you saying about it to yourself? Sit with the pain, carefully staying present in each micro-moment.
- ⊙ **Nourish** yourself. Bring kindness and tenderness to the suffering, realizing that you are not alone and that suffering is a part of life.

At those times when our worst fears are realized, when our world is shaken at its foundation, it is then we are called to the immediacy of the moment. Through embodied presence, I not only survived, I grew in both wisdom and compassion. I once again realized the truth of impermanence, the truth of death, and that my own story is infinitesimally small in this vast cosmos. I am not

alone in my suffering; I am a part of something larger. God, Life Force, Loving Presence, the Sacred Dance is moving through every one of us. And we come to know it intimately through mindful attention to the sensations in our body.

*My own story
is infinitesimally
small in this vast
cosmos. I am
not alone in my
suffering.*



CHAPTER 9

THE PRESENCE OF EMPTINESS

*Rest in natural great peace, this exhausted mind,
beaten helplessly by karma and neurotic thoughts,
like the relentless fury of the pounding waves in
the infinite ocean of samsara.*

Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche

*If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing
would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has
closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow
chinks of his cavern.*

William Blake

That particular autumn the high country bordered on the mystical. The air was crisp and charged. The glorious spectacle of colors was electric and slightly surreal, as Nature displayed her exceptional and extraordinary annual dance of transition. The sky was a deeper, darker blue than I could remember. Brilliant, iridescent yellow-red-green aspen leaves flashed in the breeze. The glacial lakes were transparent and emerald green, and majestic mountain tops were covered with what looked like powdered sugar frosting.

I was at a two-week meditation retreat led by John Travis. We were meeting in the peaceful beauty of a lodge nestled in the mountains of Wyoming. The sweet earthy smell of fallen decomposing leaves made its way into the room where we sat and moved deep inside my belly. As I walked outdoors in silence, the rich scent of the forest floor evoked ancient woodlands and stirred something elemental and primordial within me. The forces of existence spoke their truth of transition, birth and death. Daily I stood in astonishment and awe at the miracle of life that I am part of.

One day in the second week of the retreat, after the dharma talk, I settled once again into the silence of the meditation hall, paying attention to sensations that were arising and passing. But this time something astonishing happened. Suddenly I slipped through a crack in the foundation of my universe

*I slipped through
a crack in my
universe and
went into free
fall, along with
all of my ideas of
what existence is
. . . or isn't.*

and went into free fall, along with all of my ideas of what existence is . . . or isn't. "Big Mind/Body" opened into a void, a blackness, preceding all form and all thought, a pregnant cauldron of pure potential, vital and charged with potency. Thoughts and sensations appeared and blipped by at lightning speed, all held within an endless space. There was a gap between every thought that was appearing in my mind and between every sensation. It was like noticing the white space between each of these printed words, overlooked until attention turns toward it.

The space was an astonishing "nothing." The "nothing" was utterly void. It was beyond pleasant or unpleasant. It

was visual and it wasn't. There was simply not anything at all. I had fallen into a gap that was completely empty yet potent. I realized that everything in existence arises from this fertile field. It was truth revealed. I abided in knowing that the entire universe blipped into being and disappeared back into emptiness at lightning speed—creation arising one milli-instant at a time. And within this was the profound, direct experience that “I” don't exist as I had imagined. Rather, the Space of Presence—as I would call it—closer

*I am connected
to an under-
ground stream
of universal
presence.*

than my skin, contains me, as well as everything else.

When I refer to embodied presence, I typically mean being present for and aware of the ever-changing sensations that make up our experience of being alive in a body. But in this perception of the potent void, I discovered that I am connected to an underground stream of universal presence. It wants no recognition. It does nothing to enhance itself. It is equally content ironing clothes, looking out the window, or creating a masterpiece. It is useless *and* it offers me all I ever wanted: the world, my life and myself. It is what I was looking for.



As I continue to wake up in my life, I notice that my “story” is recreated in each moment, arising out of emptiness. That also means I can liberate myself from that story, stop feeding it, stop re-creating it. This is the value of silence, of pulling ourselves back from the chatter and arriving in the embodied moment.

On one of the backpacking retreats I used to lead into the wilderness, our group hiked up into the silence and solitude of the Chisos Mountain Range in Big Bend National Park in southern Texas. As usual, we practiced Noble Silence as we walked. For one woman on that particular retreat, this was a challenge she didn't seem prepared for. The first day, we put on our backpacks and started out in the cool, early morning. After walking about fifteen minutes, Becky enthusiastically shouted, "Look!" pointing to a red-tailed hawk soaring in circles above us, a sight the rest of us had already taken in. I gently reminded her of our commitment to Noble Silence, and, sweetly—out loud—she said that she understood.

About ten minutes later, I saw her whispering to the person behind her. Her whispering grew more frequent and louder as we walked, and soon it was accompanied by giggling. At our next rest stop, I took her aside and explained about distractions and how we were now turning inward. I mentioned that outer silence helps us hear our self-talk and strengthens inner silence so we can experience a deeper truth. About an hour later, when I glanced in her direction, she smiled sheepishly and, touching one finger to tight lips, waved vigorously at me. The next day I met with her in an interview and suggested she notice the urge to connect with others and just feel it instead of acting on it by talking. She looked sullen but said she was willing to try.

Assuring ourselves that we exist by confirming our presence with outside feedback can be an easy habit to fall into. It is also the way we pack tight the vast emptiness of space, protecting ourselves from the truth. In one of her poems, Wislawa Szymborska writes: "There is so much

everything that nothing is hidden quite nicely.” When we get caught in the “everything,” we shut the door on the vast “nothing” and all it can reveal.

Over the next few days, I watched as Becky transformed into a radiant, powerful woman, present in herself, present to the moment. She was taller in appearance, and her eyes had softened. Her whole face was different—it seemed lively yet filled with an open presence. She appeared at peace. At the end of the retreat, Becky reported that she’d had a terrible time on that second afternoon after I’d spoken with her, because she felt such a strong urge to connect with those around her. She said, “I felt like I had been sentenced to solitary confinement.” She’d felt restless and extremely irritated.

That evening she lay on the ground looking up at the sky, thinking how frustrating it was that she couldn’t share her experience with anyone. Then suddenly she got it. Her inner talk stopped, and she saw the breathtaking, star-filled night sky. Awe-struck, she glanced around and noticed that all of us seemed to be taking in the same thing. At last she recognized that she was a part of this world, a part of the sky, and a part of all of us. Her connection with nature, herself, and the rest of us was more meaningful and profound than words could express. She realized that speaking would have detracted from the amazing experience of being, from the stillness and awesome timeless presence of the moment.

PRACTICE

WALKING IN NATURE

Go for a walk outside in nature, preferably in a park, a forest or a wilderness area.

- ◉ Can you sense the presence of the trees and plants as living entities and conscious beings?
- ◉ Let yourself be drawn to a particular rock or tree, or perhaps to a pinecone or a leaf. Sit with it quietly for five minutes. Don't expect anything particular to happen.
- ◉ Does being with this object change anything in you?

All-encompassing space is here all the time, inside and around us. We're just not aware of it, in the same way that stars are still here in the daytime but we can't see them. In the same way, our peace and our deepest goodness are here, waiting for us to open to them. The Space, the Source, is potent, pure and compelling. Whatever we name it—emptiness, Presence, God, *spiritus*—it is the fertile creative ground. We are drawn to its purity, though perhaps it is more accurate to say that this *spiritus* in us wants to know itself and, through us, recognize itself.

*Spiritus in us
wants to know
itself, wants to
wake up and
recognize itself
through us.*



During the nine-month Sensory Awareness training I did at Green Gulch Zen Center, we experimented for long periods of time, feeling the forces of gravity and breathing. One day after a particularly intense practice session, I walked a path heading toward the ocean, needing time to digest everything I'd taken in. I sat on a cliff overlooking the Pacific, watching the waves surging up and exploding against the rocks below me. I suddenly had the indescribable feeling that I did not stop at the boundaries of my skin. I was literally a part of the ocean and the sky and the rocks. I was the same as everything else.

*Everything was
holy and nothing
was holy.*

As I sat there I remembered that Ram Dass said, "When I don't know who I am, I pray to God. When I know who I am, I am God." I experienced myself as being undivided from creation. It was not just an interesting or poetic concept or a good idea. It was much more than a thought. It was a reality! Everything was holy and nothing was holy. Life appeared both meaningless and full of meaning. No moment seemed special and every moment was precious. I knew myself to be the same as everyone, the same as Spirit or God or Essence or Presence or Oneness, manifesting itself in me. The Buddha said that when we are well-established in the body, "ardent, alert, and mindful," we open the door to the deathless. I understood then that "I" always had been and always would be, not as "Terry Ray" but as an expression of Eternal Presence.

Directly knowing this deeply affected me. After that, I began to find myself responding more appropriately in

whatever situation was arising. I knew that what needs to happen, happens. I realized that following my own truth is not a self-indulgent, hedonistic pursuit. It takes me deeper than what “I” want. It is what I am called to do. This doesn’t mean I’m necessarily drawn to what is most pleasant. For example, I rarely feel like getting out of bed at three in the morning to feed my hungry three-month old granddaughter, but more than my desire to stay asleep is my heart-felt love for this child and my wish to care for and protect her. Doing “my own thing” turns out to be doing for others.

Each time I experience the basic simplicity of who I am, I find that I am extraordinary. Also I am just the opposite. I am humbled by the truth, and I become more myself, more ordinary, more human, more simple, natural and down to earth. Embodied in Presence.



SECRET PRESENCE

I'd like to take you on a journey now to a secret land that was known by wise ancient beings. It is filled with ease, simplicity and the tranquility of primeval forests.

It is the Kingdom of the miraculous essence of existence.

It is a place that is not a place. It is anywhere and everywhere. It is, and it is not, embodied.

It includes a happiness that knows itself and loves itself equally with all things.

It is innocent. It is pure. It is ordinary.

It wants naught.

This unique, most distant terrain is within walking distance.

Even closer.

Closer than our own skin.

It's immediate. It's accessible. It's the land of the Present.

We are traveling through time to Now.

In search of the One who dwells right here, underneath our heartbeat.

We enter this realm through the sense doors.

We sneak in through strange,
magical, mysterious spaces,
like the spaces
between your big toe and your second toe,
private spaces,
like the spaces in your armpits, between your
legs and in-between your eyelashes.

Go even deeper.
Do your shoulders carry today's heavy load? Is there
a tiny fluttering in your eyelids? Are your lips pressed
together? Discover the inside of your mouth.
Now feel under your skin into the intestines,
the kidneys, and into the bowels.

Closer yet.
Enter into the veins and move inside the bloodstream.
Arrive inside the beating heart.
Soften this innermost chamber.

We are almost here.
In the Kingdom that lives in
No time
All Time
No space
All space.

Move into your breath.
In this deepest of quiet, there is the ease and peace of the
hidden land.

Each breath slips out all the way and arises, newly born,
from the great void of the abyss.

Pay close attention.

Follow carefully and find the space between
the out-breath and the in-breath.

This is where She hides.

Every 1/1000th of a second the Exquisite Lady
is created and dissolves.

She manifests in the beginning of all time and dissolves
in the space between seconds,
in the space between heartbeats,
in the space between thoughts,
in the space within the breath.

She is beloved, unbounded, and absolute.
She is reborn every tick of twinkling time,
and in the next
evaporates and vanishes into nothing.

Remain here
with Her,
as long as you can.

