I had been living in a place teeming with poverty... And yet, amidst all the rauess was a seamlessness to life, a feeling-presence and vitality that was notably absent on the streets of New York.

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

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

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

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

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

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The next month he meets his teacher, feeling completely prepared when asked, “What is the basic human problem?” Without hesitation he answers, “There is no problem.” The teacher looks at him intensely and says, “Then what are you doing here?!” The student shrugs. “I am a basic human being. I exist directly,” he says. “The basic human problem is that we think too much. We believe our thoughts. We take our thoughts to be reality.” Again the teacher says, “You are still just thinking,” and dismisses him with the ring of a bell. Now the student is completely confused. So he does what many of us do in these situations. He reads everything he can. He reads from East to West, North to South. He really, really, wants to have the right answer.

A month later he returns for his next audience, when the teacher asks, “Tell me, what is the basic human problem?” The student, feeling more confident, replies, “There is no basic human problem.” The teacher looks at him intensely and says, “The basic human problem is that we think too much. We believe our thoughts. We take our thoughts to be reality.” Again the teacher says, “You are still just thinking,” and dismisses him with the ring of a bell. Now the student is completely confused. So he does what many of us do in these situations. He reads everything he can. He reads from East to West, North to South. He really, really, wants to have the right answer.

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

As the Western world becomes more aware of our collective disembodiment, we increasingly hear of the impact that this has on our sense of connectedness and well-being, and the way it impedes a process of spiritual awakening.

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

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

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

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

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

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