



A Guide
to
Embodied
Spirituality

Your Deepest Ground

John J. Prendergast PhD

Foreword by Rick Hanson, PhD

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Foreword

Every so often you turn a corner in life and find yourself somewhere that feels both new and somehow also already deeply known.

John Prendergast's book is full of such corners, such turning points, as you find yourself drawn again and again into depths of presence and peace. I've known him for many years, and there is no one else who is both so gentle while being so fearless—even fierce—in his commitment to help others live in the depths that are our true home.

“Why bother?” we might ask. The answer lies in knowing that there is more to reality than meets the eye, more than the daily routines, more than the stresses and worries that cloud the mind. We're challenged by many things these days that make us feel uprooted, alienated, ungrounded. Instead, we long to be openhearted, undefended, and undisturbed by the worldly winds. We want to live this happiness even as we raise a family, pursue a career, and build a better world. We're not sure how. But we do know that there is more to find around the corner.

Both in our ancient spiritual traditions (which certainly include those of Indigenous people) and in modern psychology, there have been many efforts to explore these depths and find what the Buddha called the liberation of the heart. John sorts these efforts into three levels:

- feeling rooted in the earth and comfortable in your own skin

- connecting with the archetypal forces in the outer bounds of the psyche
- resting in the ultimate ground of all in which “we surrender to unbounded openness . . . and encounter an unshakable sense of well-being regardless of circumstances”

As he explores these levels of transformation, the clarity and quiet brilliance of his writing is a real pleasure. Still, John is first and foremost a therapist and a spiritual teacher. He’s absolutely serious about bringing us home to the heart. This is a book of practice, not theory, offered by someone who has practiced deeply himself. He offers brief experiential exercises, revelatory conversations, some of his own bumpy lessons, startling insights into the mind, and simple daily ways to live from the deepest ground.

He is an extraordinarily knowledgeable and sensitive guide, and attuned to the fears and blocks that the ordinary mind throws up even as it also reaches for release. He keeps returning to the body, to the pains and joys it holds, and to the deep ancestral wisdom within each of us. This is a very *feeling* book, rich with imagination. He steers clear of scholarly terminology, but I can say that his practices engage powerful neurological processes, including those that give us a sense of stability and place in a shaky world. It’s rare to find an author who can both bring you into direct contact with the ultimate transpersonal ground and also offer so much clinically skillful advice about healing trauma.

John is an ardent backpacker, often venturing out into wilderness on his own and sometimes with others. The spirit of that is present as you hear him in these pages: a friendly voice, warm and encouraging, often amused and always curious, steadfast and forward moving while remaining aware of that which doesn’t move inside each of us and never leaves us behind. Questing onward, looking ahead with wonder, and inviting us to go with him around the next corner.

Rick Hanson, PhD

Introduction



We all have a subtle yet profound pull to live more from our hearts—our center of love, compassion, gratitude, freedom, and silent wisdom—and less from our heads, the primary source of our critical judgments and core limiting beliefs. Yet to live a truly heart-centered life, we must feel safe. As a result, to live from the heart in a deep and steady way, we must take the time to discover our deepest ground.

I have been exploring the relationship between the heart and the ground for decades, both as a depth psychotherapist, now retired, and as a spiritual teacher. I once thought I could write a single book about both, but I found that the richness of each subject deserved books of their own. I've devoted chapters to the theme of the ground in my previous books *In Touch* and *The Deep Heart*, but here I've taken the space to fully unpack this critically important subject.

Why is the ground—the felt-sense of spacious stability in and beneath the body—so important? In my experience, it is where most spiritual explorers, both beginners and veterans, get stuck, often unknowingly. The ground is largely terra incognita, an unknown territory. There is enormous resistance to exploring it. Why? As in the

fanciful maps made by early ocean explorers, there may be dragons there. What are these apparent dragons that hold us back from fully landing *right here* in the middle of our beautiful, challenging, and poignant lives and opening to what is? Survival fear and confusion. We are deeply wired to survive, and we are deeply confused about where our essential safety lies.

Survival fear—the instinctual fear of physical and psychological annihilation—takes many forms, but mostly it draws on our desire to control what we cannot: ourselves, others, and the world. We fear the loss of this illusory control and live with a chronic inner grip of tension, losing touch with our bodies and overly relying on our thinking. We cling to the familiar and avoid the unknown. We believe untrue and unkind stories about ourselves and the world. We try to connect to and belong with others in ways that are superficial and unfulfilling, projecting both our dark and luminous shadows onto others. Above all, we forget who we are and take ourselves to be separate from the whole of life. As a result, we live inauthentically, out of integrity with the depths of who we really are. This leaves an inner ache and sense of lack.

Further, most religious and spiritual traditions reinforce our resistance to opening to the ground and *experientially* facing our survival fears. Most of these traditions focus on the upper half of the body and accent developing the mind or the heart area. The lower half of the body, with its instinctual tendencies of survival, sex, and power, is largely devalued or ignored. There is, however, a growing recognition in contemplative spiritual circles that the region of the belly must be included if we are to authentically embody our spiritual understanding so that it enhances our relationships, work, and care for the planet, the latter of which is in increasingly dire straits. This brings us to the theme of the *hara*, which means “belly” in Japanese.

The *hara*, or gut, ranges from the solar plexus to the base of the spine. When I first contemplated writing this book, I thought it would be about the *hara* as a whole, which is described in Taoism and Japanese martial arts such as aikido. But I soon realized that it was

actually the lowest level of the hara—the base of the spine—that was my real focus. In terms of the body, this is where terror localizes. This is where it feels like the rug gets pulled out from under us. This is where we either connect to or cut off from our sense of the ground.

The ground is our felt-sense of support and stability that lies *beneath the body*, and therefore our deepest ground is underground. There are different levels to this sense of being grounded. On one level—the most obvious one—we feel rooted in and connected to the earth. Our bodies are earth-bodies, and we are able to feel this earthy connection. Another level, less frequented, is archetypal. Here we may be pulled down into an underground realm on a mythic journey or contact ancestral conditioning. Shamanistic rituals, vision quests, extraordinary dreams, and plant medicine can sometimes induce contact with this powerful realm. There is a deeper level yet: the ground of being or the groundless ground. Here we surrender to unbounded openness and discover that, in this space, questions of safety or unsafety completely dissolve. When we open to our deepest ground, we encounter an unshakable sense of well-being regardless of circumstances. And our heart, now deeply grounded, is able to fully flower like a lotus with its roots deeply anchored in the mud. We feel in deep integrity with ourself.

There is also a false ground, the ground of the apparent separate self or “little me.” This ground is a contraction, a frozen place, much like a thin layer of ice over a body of water. As a separate self, we can sometimes sense that we are skating on this thin ice. This false ground is a chronic grip of inner tension that defends against opening to our true ground. It is a bundle of false beliefs, reactive feelings, and somatic contractions that we mis-take to be ourself. We unconsciously cling to it because it is familiar, choosing a known suffering over an unknown openness. As a result, we assume that, except for brief respites, feeling anxious, depressed, alienated, and disconnected is all that life offers. We habituate to feeling separate and inwardly contracted. Finding our true ground requires that we see through this

false ground. Seeing through what is false allows a spontaneous letting go and unfolding of what is true.

My approach to the ground may be surprising to some since it includes dimensions that are not usually included or combined. It involves a blend of contemporary depth psychotherapy, energetic sensitivity, and nondual understanding based upon direct experience. In my view, at least one of these important dimensions often gets left out of teachings about spiritual development. My psychotherapeutic understanding comes from over four decades of practicing adult individual psychotherapy as well as from supervising and training masters-level counseling students for twenty-three years. My energetic sensitivity first emerged in late boyhood and blossomed once I began a regular meditation practice and started working with clients. My nondual understanding unfolded after many years of meditation and self-inquiry and was catalyzed by years of close study, first with the European sage Jean Klein and then with the American spiritual teacher Adyashanti.

How to Approach This Book

As you read this book, pay attention to your body, especially to the felt-sense in your pelvis and below. Be willing to be surprised. Your subtle sensitivity is also listening as you read! I also invite you to approach this book as an experiential guide. While the concepts here offer a helpful map, you will need to put them into practice to realize their transformative potential. The guided inquiries and meditations assist this. Try them out several times, particularly those that are most resonant, and adapt them as you see fit. Make yourself comfortable. I suggest that you record them with appropriate pauses on your smartphone. Don't just be a curious onlooker; really dive into this exploration. The point is to embody this understanding so you know it in your bones.

All of the anecdotes, conversations, and brief case studies that I share in this book are real. In most cases, I've changed names and masked identities. The exceptions are in chapters 3, 11, and 16 where, with permission, I have used real names. These accounts are broadly

representative of both beginners and seasoned explorers as they open to their ground and make genuine in-the-moment discoveries. My hope is that this approach encourages you to find out what is true for you.

The book is divided into three sections, partially following the classic structure of the underworld journey. In part 1, entitled “The Preparation,” I offer you a map of the territory, suggestions for an optimal attitude, and some highly useful resources for your journey. In part 2, entitled “The Descent,” I invite you to question your false ground, recognize and welcome your deepest fears, let yourself fall open, and discover the groundless ground. I also discuss the role of the collective unconscious pioneered by the founder of analytical psychology Carl Jung. In part 3, entitled “Embodying Spirit,” I describe how discovering your deepest ground impacts your ordinary life and radiates out into the greater field.

A Personal Note

I will be in my midseventies when this book is published. It is almost certainly my last. As such, it feels like a final flowering and offering. I pass this understanding on to you with empty, weathered hands formed in a bow of gratitude. Consider it like an open love letter you found lying on the ground.

May you be peaceful, happy, deeply at ease, and filled with gratitude. May you spontaneously and generously share this embodied understanding with those around you. And may you take care of this precious blue jewel of a planet for the generations of beings, human and otherwise, that follow.