

# Eyes Wide Open

Buddhist Instructions on  
Merging Body and Vision



Will Johnson



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on Merging Body and Vision

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Inner Traditions  
Rochester, Vermont • Toronto, Canada

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*To the seer and visionary in all of us*

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“By situating the body (or *soma*) right at the center of sitting meditation practice, Will Johnson helps initiate a quiet, slow revolution. . . . Such a contribution to meditation instruction is transformative in numerous respects. This book, like previous books by the author, is a landmark text in the contemporary literature of homecoming.”

JAMES MARTIN, COFOUNDER OF MINDFUL SOMATICS INSTITUTE

“With his delightful stories and exploration of the many wisdom traditions, Will Johnson continues to impress upon us the importance of the embodied experience. If we are to gain any traction on the spiritual path or to address that ‘nagging inkling’ that something just isn’t right in our lives, this little gem of a book can guide us. Johnson offers many simple techniques to do this, honing in on vision as the vehicle for our exploration. The daily experience of ‘looking’ has been imbued with the power of transformation with one quick read! Will Johnson continues to be at the forefront of body-based dharmic practice and its confluence with somatic psychology.”

JACKIE ASHLEY, MA, BC-DMT, LPC, ADJUNCT FACULTY AT NAROPA UNIVERSITY

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# Acknowledgments

Special thanks go to Phil Gronquist, who, many long decades ago, first helped me open my eyes and see.

As always, the good folks at Inner Traditions—in particular Jon Graham, Meghan MacLean, Erica Robinson, and Elizabeth Wilson—have been wonderful guides, helpmates, and contributors to this project.

If there was ever an award presented to a spiritual teacher who created a technique of awakening so simple that it was probably destined to be overlooked, that award might easily go to the English seer Douglas Harding. Douglas's book *On Having No Head* inspired me as a young man to pay far more attention to my relationship with the visual field. The Rumi quotation to “dissolve the body into vision” is cited in that book.

To my wonderful wife, Gretavatti, who raises love to the level of devotion, and to my two handsome sons, Kailas and Jamie—all of us fans of the movie *Avatar*—I say, “I see you.”





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*when my mind was cleansed of impurities  
like a mirror of its dust and dirt  
I recognized the Self in me*

*deep in my looking  
the last words vanished*

*joyous and silent  
the waking that met me there*

LALLA

*if you use your mind to look for Buddha  
you won't see Buddha*

*to find Buddha  
you have to see your nature*

BODHIDHARMA

*with my eyes wide open  
I absorbed everything  
as a sponge absorbs liquid*

HENRI MATISSE



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# INTRODUCTION

## The Monk Who Lost the Contest

*right behind your eyes you are there*

Take a moment, and you can feel yourself there. Looking. You're always there, and whenever your eyes are open, you're always looking. So intimate is your connection with your looking that when you say, "I'm looking," you're not just saying that you're engaged in the act of seeing. You're also implying that you *are* your looking, that how you look and what you, in turn, see are a direct reflection of who you are in this moment.

No matter what its contents may consist of, the visual field only ever offers us two choices, two different ways of looking and seeing, and the choice we make profoundly affects how we experience ourselves in this moment. It all happens in the space behind your eyes, the place from which you look—the place where awareness of self and awareness of vision cross paths.



Ordinarily the way we view the visual field confirms in us a felt sense of separation from everything we can perceive to exist outside our bodies. The visual field that I look out on, with its infinitude of multiple, discreet objects, with its convincing sense of *otherness*, is so *out there*, outside of myself, and I am so *in here*, right behind my eyes and inside my body. This way of seeing and being—through which I experience myself as somehow poured into my body, like a beverage into a bottle, and view everything inside my body as exclusively *me* while everything outside my body is *other than me*—effectively splits the whole of experience into two neatly separated worlds—one inside, the other outside. And even though these worlds are constantly interacting with each other, still they must remain forever separate and disjointed. This is, far and away, how most of us view the world and our relationship to it.

But this splitting in two of the world of experience—into an inside-the-body world of thoughts, sensations, feelings, and personal identity and an outside-the-body world dominated by the otherness of the visual field—creates in many of us a lurking uneasiness and tension, a sense of isolation and loneliness that we're not easily able to shake, a feeling of alienation and disconnection from the large world into which we've been born and out on which we look. This subtly pervasive sense of separation, of vague disconnection—mind separate from body, self from other, inner from outer—is

the base of the human condition, and it's staring us in the eye. We may have no idea what it is we feel that we're splitting ourselves off from. All we may sense is that something just feels . . . a bit off. Something keeps tugging at us, some niggling little feeling (or perhaps not so niggling and not so small), and even though we've accepted it as part of being human, it still doesn't particularly feel very good.

The Buddha spoke of this uneasiness, this nagging inkling that something isn't quite right, *duhkka*. The great thirteenth-century Sufi mystic and poet Rumi spoke of this uneasiness as well, in terms completely resonant with how split in two your world of experience can be carved by this way of seeing. He would say it makes you feel separated from something you very badly want to embrace and that feeling separated in this way hurts, both in your body and in your soul.



As common as it may be, this isn't the only way we can look out at the world. There's a second choice we can make, and it's almost the exact opposite of the first. Instead of reinforcing how isolated and alone we are in this vast universe, the visual field is equally capable of reflecting back to us a feeling of sense of connection and inclusion, as though it were offering an invitation to merge with the energies of the larger universe in which we live and look out on, rather than confirming how irrevocably separated from them we are.

Through the shift in perspective of this second kind of seeing, divisions between your inner and outer worlds start to drop away and you begin, bodily, to experience an intimate connectivity to the world you look out on. Instead of a world composed of an infinite number of separate objects, which you are but one, you become privy to a substratum of experience—what mystics have often referred to as the great ground of being—that underlies the world of appearances and ties all the individual parts back together into a single, cohesive piece. Beyond the mind caught up in conventional divisions of inner and outer, there's another place of perception that you can directly access, a place of far greater ease and profound relaxation in which you no longer feel so disjointed from the world you see.

However, even though it's freely available to everyone, the reclamation of this unified perspective still has to be earned. If you feel drawn to its perception, you will want to shift your relationship with the world you look out on, transform the way you look and see—consciously and intentionally, and altogether naturally—so that what you see supports your participation in this more connected state, rather than your continued estrangement from it. And that's what this little book hopes to show you how to do.



Fair enough, but the challenge that literally faces us as we work to shift our relationship with vision is that, even though we have our eyes open, we don't necessarily see what's here to be seen. As Anaïs Nin famously observed, "We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are." We don't just look out on the visual field with the impartiality of a mirror. Instead, we interpret. We filter out. We sift through and sort. We project. We view the visual field through a distorting lens created by our personal biases, beliefs, tensions, hopes, fears, and prejudices. If the lens is powerful enough, it can color everything that we see.

The anatomical structures associated with vision—the eyes with their retinal openings, the cones and rods that register color and light, the neural pathways and electrical impulses that transmit visual data to the visual cortex of the brain where it's all somehow reassembled into a recognizable image—are like the neutral components of a shutter on a camera. But then each of us goes and places our own unique lens over that shutter, and our choice of lens manipulates and colors what we ultimately see.

How are these filters and lenses formed? Often our conceptions and beliefs about how reality is constructed are so powerful that we're unable to have a direct perception of what we're actually looking out on without immediately and automatically applying this conceptual overlay and buffer. As just one example, we believe that physical objects are solid and inert, so we tend to see them that way—lifeless, motionless, and inanimate—but by the end of this book the solid, blank wall that you look over at on the far side of the room might start looking quite a bit more alive and shimmery (but let's wait and see).



It's not just the attitudes and beliefs in the mind that create these filters and distorting lenses. We also create them through the way we live in the body. A body that is tense will view a world on constant alert. A body that is sluggish will view a world of depression. A body that is angry will keep encountering situations to be angry about. A body that is relaxed and balanced will view a world of grace and beauty. A body under the enchantment of love can sometimes possess the uncanny ability not to see any of the flaws and shadows of its object of affection.



But if we're not seeing things as they truly are, and if seeing and being are so inextricably reflective of each other, then we can't be experiencing ourselves as we truly are either and must be putting up instead with a version that is distorted and less authentic than it could be. If we're looking out on the world through a distorting lens of beliefs, prejudices, and patterns of bodily tension, we're also distorting who we, the lookers, believe and experience ourselves to be. The task and path of the Buddhas has always been oriented toward helping us come out of the dreams of who we think we are and awaken into our true, essential nature. If we're to apprehend this essential nature (and wake up from the nightmare of separation in the process), then it would make sense that we would want to cleanse our vision and remove whatever distorting lenses we've superimposed onto our perception of the visual field.

The Theravadin Buddhists have a beautiful word for this clear vision that allows us to experience ourselves as we truly are. They call this way of seeing and being *vipassana*, which translates as “seeing things as they are.” And to learn to see things as they actually are, not just as we perceive them to be through our multiple filters of distorting attitudes and bodily tensions, is the intent and purpose of their practice.

The perfect symbol for this extraordinarily clear visioning is a clean and polished mirror that simply reflects whatever is set in front of it. A mirror has no biases or prejudices. It doesn't interpret what it sees; nor does it project its own beliefs out onto the world it reflects. It makes no distinctions or valuations. It has no preferences. It simply reflects back what's here to be seen. Here's what the Sufi poet Rumi had to say about the visioning of the mirror in contrast to the way in which humans most

look and see:

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*the mirror can reflect every face as it is  
because it has no face of its own  
the mirror neither fawns over beauty  
nor turns away from the homely  
beauty appears on the face of the mirror  
so does homeliness  
the mirror has no quarrel either way  
but a pleasant image comes to your eyes  
and you become happy  
a homely image comes  
and you become withdrawn*

The clearer we're able to keep our vision and the fewer the layers of reactive grime on the windows through which we look out on the world, the closer we get to the truth of who we are.

So . . . how can we keep the windows reasonably clean? How can we look out on the world through eyes that mirror, rather than interpret or project? How can we shift our vision so that what we look out on heals, rather than reinforces, the separation?

To better understand how to create this mirrorlike vision and way of seeing, let's turn our attention for a moment to a multigenerational tale of succession that began in the time of the Buddha and ended in an extraordinary contest that took place in the mountains of China over thirteen hundred years ago.



Toward the end of his life, some twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha decided he wanted to choose a formal successor, someone who so understood and embodied the teaching that, after the Buddha passed away, he or she could be relied on to keep the teachings alive, their pure essence intact, and to resolve any questions or disputes that might arise. As we will see, there are many different ways to choose a successor.

In the case of the Buddha, he sat silently and twirled a lotus flower before a throng of seated students who had come to hear him speak. Every morning, without fail, he would come out from his living quarters, sit down, and explain the teachings to whoever had come to hear. But on this morning he did something completely out of character. After sitting down, he didn't say a word. He just sat there, twirled the flower, and looked out over the assembly, moving his gaze from one person to the next.

Most of the students may have felt a bit nervous and confused by his strange behavior, but one of the senior students, Mahakashyap, realized the exquisite humor of the situation and burst out laughing. After all, the truth that can be spoken of is only words; the silent truth that can be

recognized in the moment of the twirling of a flower is what we're really after. Mahakashyap couldn't contain the joy of his insight (and may have found the nervous response of the rest of the assembly quite funny as well). It is said that the Buddha *looked* at Mahakashyap, which is when his student broke into laughter. The Buddha simply smiled back and declared him his successor.

Over the centuries, in an unbroken chain, the process would be repeated. The person who had been charged with preserving the essence of the *dharma*, the teachings, would choose a successor before he passed on.

Around the year 500, the twenty-eighth successor of the Buddha, the Indian prince Bodhidharma, traveled to China, where he continued the ritual of naming a successor to whom the teachings could be entrusted before he passed away. This move from India to China ushered in a whole new era in the transmission of the Buddhist dharma. Bodhidharma was given the title the first patriarch, and from one person to the next, successors kept getting chosen until we finally find ourselves, sometime around the middle of the seventh century, at the monastery on Huang Mountain, where the fifth patriarch Hongren was living and teaching. And here our story can begin in earnest.

One day, toward the end of his life, Hongren announced that a contest would be held to determine his successor (no twirling flower for him!). The rules of the contest were simple: write a *gatha*, a poem, that demonstrates your understanding of the essence of mind. And the prize was tantalizing—the composer of the best poem would become the sixth patriarch and would be entrusted with the promotion, preservation, and protection of the dharma.

At first, it didn't appear as though it would develop into much of a contest. At the time of Hongren's announcement, there was a head monk living in the monastery whom everyone greatly admired and looked up to. The name of this monk was Shenxiu, and while Hongren held the title of the fifth patriarch, Shenxiu was entrusted with much of the teaching and explication of the dharma that took place at the monastery. So prominent and admired was Shenxiu within the organization of the monastery that all the monks simply assumed that he was the only one qualified to write the poem and be named the sixth patriarch. And so no one bothered to write a poem of his own but simply waited to see what Shenxiu would compose.

They did not have long to wait. In the morning, Shenxiu's poem had been posted on one of the monastery walls. It read simply:

*the body is the tree of awakening  
the mind is like a clear mirror  
at all times we must work to keep it polished  
and not let any dust collect*

The appearance of the poem in the early morning hours created a great stir within the monastery. When Hongren was told of it, he immediately approved of the wisdom it contained.

"Practice according to this poem," he is said to have told the assembly of monks. "Not only will you receive great benefits, you'll avoid falling into any traps or mistakes. So go, light incense and pay respect to this poem. Keep reciting it, explore what it's telling you, and you're bound to see your essential nature." Clearly, Shenxiu was to be given the robe and begging bowl that would signify

that he was the successor to Hongren.

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Ah, but not so fast. Now there was another lowly, mostly unnoticed monk living at the monastery named Hui Neng. As a young man, he happened to overhear a Buddhist discourse and simply by hearing the words experienced a profound understanding and awakening. He heard of Hongren and was determined to study with him.

When he finally arrived at Hongren's monastery, he was able to arrange a meeting with the patriarch, who immediately challenged him in his understanding of the teachings. Hui Neng had been born into a lower-caste family from the south, and Buddhist teachings at that time were generally reserved for the upper, more educated classes. As a test, Hongren taunted Hui Neng, asking him how an illiterate barbarian from the southern countries could possibly understand the dharma teachings of the Buddha. Hui Neng calmly replied that, although there was a great deal of outward difference between himself and Hongren, their essential nature was one and the same. Hongren recognized that Hui Neng possessed an unusual, innate understanding of the dharma and accepted him into the monastery but assigned him a low-ranking job in the kitchen so as not to attract attention or arouse any jealousy amongst the older, more class-conscious monks.

Hui Neng saw the poem that Shenxiu had composed and decided that it didn't satisfactorily explain the essence of mind; in fact, it didn't speak of it at all. Rather, it spoke only of the practices that lead to a realization of one's essential nature, so he decided to compose a clarification of Shenxiu's effort. Unable to write himself, he requested the help of a friend in the monastery, and by the next morning the following poem had appeared on another monastery wall:

*there's really nothing like a tree of awakening  
nor is the mind anything at all like a mirror  
since everything is eternally empty of any fundamental essence  
where could dust collect*

Well, you can imagine what kind of stir that created.

Later that evening, Hongren summoned Hui Neng to his chambers, where they spoke at length of the nature of mind. While Shenxiu's poem beautifully and simply presented the path of practice that leads to an awakening of essential nature, Hui Neng's response captured the essence of what that indescribable nature is like. Hui Neng was named the sixth patriarch and the shocked community of monks loyal to Shenxiu had to deal with the reality that their favorite son had lost the contest.



Ours is a world that is unkind to losers. The word itself carries a heavy, pejorative weight. Touch the wall at an Olympic swimming final one-hundredth of a second after your competitor and you're relegated to the status of an also-ran, a loser, and your efforts are looked down upon as somehow inferior and failed. While outwardly Hongren had praised the wisdom contained in Shenxiu's poem

inwardly he may not have been completely satisfied. Yes, the poem perfectly described the practice but ~~Hui Neng was right: the contest had called for a poem that portrays the essence of mind, not the practices that lead to it.~~ One may know the practices and follow them, but that in itself is no guarantee that the person has completely realized his or her essential nature, and only to someone fully realized could the dharma robe and bowl that signify the succession of the teaching be awarded. Hongren had little choice but to award the prize to the one who embodied the dharma, rather than to the one who was the master teacher of it. And so, while students of Buddhism continue to be intimately familiar with the story of Hui Neng and routinely praise the wisdom in the poem he composed, Shenxiu and his poem tend to be more overlooked, even forgotten, relegated to the historical bin of those who came second. Shenxiu is mostly remembered, after all, as the Monk Who Lost the Contest.

But clearly, Shenxiu was no dunce. In four short lines, he managed to enunciate a path of practices that leads to a profound shift in how we view reality, and the subsequent development of Buddhism in China and, later, in Japan reflects the ongoing dialogue and tension between his and Hui Neng's poems and their two different approaches to the teachings.

In Hui Neng we have the example of the person who's fully realized the indestructible nature of mind that doesn't require any practices or techniques as support. In Shenxiu we have the example of the dedicated practitioner who's always on the alert, always watching the moment-to-moment changing show of mind and body, always aware of when one's lost one's awareness, always gently bringing the mind and body back to a condition of watchful awakening, always keeping the clear mirror of the mind as free of dust and obscuration as possible. Hui Neng describes what the enlightened state is like, but Shenxiu shows us the way to create the conditions in which Hui Neng's understanding might dawn on us. If you had to make a choice, which is ultimately the more valuable and useful to you at this moment: a description of your destination or a map of how to get there?

For the purposes of understanding our relationship to the visual field and the world in which we live, I choose Shenxiu. His poem is a shorthand manual on how to initiate mirrorlike vision and provides a number of direct clues to help explain how we can contact our essential nature through embracing the visual field and merging with it, rather than viewing it as something alien and separate.

The foremost clue that Shenxiu gives us is that the body plays a critical role in supporting the ability of the mind to function like a mirror and see things as they are. For most people, spiritual practice is primarily an examination of what we conventionally call mind; body is often overlooked as a lesser partner in the exercise. But Shenxiu is telling us that this isn't so. In fact, quite the opposite is true—for our minds to become awakened and start functioning like a mirror, rather than a constant interpreter or projector, we first need to awaken the body. What might this mean, and how do we go about doing that?

Then, by referring to the image of the mirror as the symbol through which to understand the workings of the mind, Shenxiu acknowledges the primacy of *vision* in the pantheon of our senses. After all, a mirror is about vision, pure and simple. A mirror reflects what is visually apparent. To create a mind like a mirror without obscuring layers of dust and soot is, literally, to *see things as they are*. What happens when we let go of the thoughts and interpretations and analyses and projections? What happens when we awaken our body, silence our thoughts . . . and see?



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# ONE

## Awakening the Body

*the body is the tree of awakening*

Shenxiu's poem begins by telling us that the body is the tree of awakening. It does not say the tree of the wish-fulfilling jewel, the tree of the fruit of life, the tree of restful dreams, the tree of abundance. It says the tree of awakening. What happens at that tree is an awakening, and the awakening needs to occur in the body.

But what's so sleepy about the body? And what needs to wake up?

The body has fallen asleep through our having lost touch with its feeling presence, its palpable organic, felt life, its vibrancy so deeply sourced in sensation. We lose ourselves in thought and tense ourselves in ways that hold this vibrancy in and stifle its emergent, felt glow. It's as though we've turned down the dimmer switch on the body's felt presence, just as a nursery school teacher will dim the lights when it's time for the small ones to take their nap, and in the darkening that's ensued our bodies have become very sleepy indeed.

And so the first thing that Shenxiu tells us is that, in order to contact our essential nature, we need to wake the body up. We need to rekindle its felt presence, nudge it gently out of its sleepiness (again like the kindly nursery school teacher), and welcome it back into a more wakeful state.



To awaken the body is to awaken the long-dormant tactile sensations that fill the body from head to foot. So small, oscillating so fast, these minute little pinprick blips and wavelets of sensation, once awakened, can be felt as part of a massed flow or current, a felt shimmer, vibrating lightly here and surging strongly there, pulsing, throbbing, dancing, effervescing throughout the entire body.

Simply by placing your relaxed awareness in any part of the body, sensations that have long been asleep, in a kind of hibernation, mostly unfelt and blanketed over, can start to wake up. They begin to hum, throb, pulsate, to come back to life, and this vibratory tingling, this sparkling in wakefulness, can be immediately and directly felt.

Sensations are the flowers on the tree of awakening, in constant bloom as the body wakes up itself, one bursting cluster after another, lightly buzzing here, suddenly cascading there, tingling and vibrating, a current of flow, nothing unmoving or solid, like individual droplets of water in the current of the life force that flows through you like a stream through a meadow.



But while sensations can be felt to exist everywhere in the body, we ordinarily have little awareness of them. Ours is a strongly disembodied, even somatophobic, culture and we suppress the feeling of the presence of the body. We hold sensations in and, in doing so, dull them. We blanket them over and hold back their glow. We value *psyche* over *soma*—the life of the intellect with its abilities to formulate abstract thought and linguistic concept over the body with its singular ability to feel. And yet it is the simple sensory field of bodily sensation that Shenxiu points to as the source of an awakened knowing that can lead us out of the muddle that layers of abstract thought have successfully built up around us.

For the body to awaken from its dreamy sleep, sensations need to be allowed to come out of exile, pardoned for crimes they never committed, welcomed back into the cloth of awareness, given permission to once again make their shimmer felt. Suppressing the natural condition of the body's feeling-shimmer, we're mostly only aware of isolated pockets of pain, generalized unpleasant sensation or large-scale numbness, and the occasional rush of bodily pleasure, fleeting as it may be. And so Shenxiu tells us that we need to awaken the slumbering body and reembrace the whole extraordinary field of sensation, every bit as major a sensory field as the fields of vision and sound, but one to which we mostly remain blind and deaf, literally out of touch.



To better understand the mechanisms that keep sensations so sleepy, it's helpful to examine the relationship between body and thought. The sensational presence of the body remains dormant, unfeeling, and asleep as long as we stay lost and adrift in unbidden thought, consumed by the story lines that the mind incessantly spins and pours out, like some feverishly active, linguistic version of a silkworm. If we're really honest in examining what's actually happening to us at any given moment, we quickly realize that a large portion of our moment-to-moment experience is taken up by the domineering presence of the internal, mostly involuntary, monologue of the mind, the silent voice inside one's head that keeps speaking and making pronouncements about incidents, events, people in our lives, feelings, fantasies, perceptions, fears, regrets, hopes.

Sometimes this monologue sounds like a play-by-play sports announcer, describing in detail our every move, our every scored goal, our every dropped ball. Sometimes it's more like a political commentator, analyzing and explaining what's going on in our life, exploring the situations and causes that have led to this moment, offering predictions of what's likely to follow as a result (and not infrequently spinning the news, like the silkworm again, to support a particular ideology). Sometimes the monologue criticizes, judges, admires, or makes comparisons with the behavior of others. Sometimes it gets completely caught up in the drama of our personal lives and story lines, of excitement and despair.

Our unbidden thoughts gravitate strongly to playing back events that occurred in the past and looking forward to events that are yet to come. What they're incapable of accessing, however, is an awareness of what's actually happening to us right now, in this very moment. And this is where bodhi comes in, for this is what the body is so adept at doing. Sensations are so evanescent, so transitory in appearance—arising and passing away, appearing and disappearing with such rapidity—that we can only be aware of them, only feel and know them, right now and it is this ever-morphing realm of right now that the Buddhist dharma is so interested in exploring. Past and future are places in the mind; right now is the felt experience of the body.



The relationship between sensations in the body and random thoughts in the mind is an uneasy one at best. Mostly, the relationship is like a teeter-totter: when one side is elevated, the other is suppressed. It's not possible to be lost in thought and present in body at the same time. At those moments when we drift off into internal monologues, we block out and lose awareness of body as feeling presence. It's not that though the appearance of unbidden thought—the ongoing chatter of the internal, involuntary monologue—has a numbing effect on sensation. Lost in thought, you lose awareness of body.

The teeter-totter needn't be stuck in this one place, though. It can shift position, and suddenly what was elevated drops down and what was suppressed rises up. While it is true that lost in thought we can't be present in body, what is also true is that once we allow sensations to be fully stirred and kindled (what the great twentieth-century Burmese vipassana teacher U Ba Khin referred to as “activating *anicca*,” kindling an awareness of body as a field of constantly changing, shimmering sensations), once we let ourselves feel body, once we bring it back to life, awaken it from its slumber . . . in that moment unbidden thought stops.

In an awakened body, consciousness will naturally function more like a mirror. Random thoughts and entrenched beliefs create the dust that Shenxiu refers to later in the poem, a kind of obscuring coating, a filmy layer that keeps the mirror of the mind cloudy and the sensations of the body blanketed over.



So either you're lost in your mind or present in your body. You can't be both at once. When there's a great deal of semiconscious monologizing going on, mind serves as a barrier that separates the visual field that you look out on from the place in the center of your being out from which you're looking and so you reinforce your sense of being separate from the universe in which you live. When you're able to kindle awareness of body as a unified field of shimmering, vibratory, tactile sensations and energies, the barrier starts dissolving and the place from which you look and the visual field out of which you look start merging back together into a more unified, coterminous phenomenon.



How do you feel sensations? How do you let their presence emerge? How do you welcome them back into felt awareness? How do you help them wake up?

The most powerful thing you can do is simply give yourself permission to feel them and then turn your attention to them. You can't force them into appearance. You can't manufacture or create them. Even though you may not be aware of them, they're still here *in potentia* all the time, like an object waiting patiently in a drawer you rarely open, and you can't create something that's already here.

Even though our culture may have a strange bias against doing so (and as ludicrous as it feels to even have to say this), know that it's completely okay to open to the feeling presence of the body. It's okay to let sensations come forward into feeling. It's okay to surrender to their organic current and presence, giving yourself permission to feel their vibrancy and life, shedding the taboo that, for whatever reason, our culture has placed on their awareness. And it's also okay, even sublimely natural, to enter into the condition of consciousness that felt presence reveals.

First you invite them back. And then you turn your attention to them. By focusing your attention on any small part of the body, sensations that have taken you up on your welcoming gesture naturally start surfacing, like stars coming out in the early evening sky. Keep allowing sensations and turning your attention to them, and more and more keep emerging until, one day, the sky of the body like a view of the Milky Way on a clear night in a remote desert, is filled full with them. Remember we're only unaware of them because our attention is elsewhere. By simply turning your attention to them, you shine a warming light on them and they begin to wake up and come out of their shadowy slumber. They sparkle, they tingle, they shimmer.

One of the many remarkable tenets of twentieth-century physics suggests that there's no such thing as completely objective observation. As soon as you turn your attention to something, you somehow start affecting what you've turned your attention to; something in your focus starts interacting with what you're focusing on. In the case of sensations, as soon as you start paying them attention, they respond by waking up and coming back to felt life.

While it may take time and consistent effort to become fully conversant with the felt range of sensations throughout your body, just letting yourself feel the body right now—this giving permission to sensations—is as sophisticated a strategy to awaken them as anything. Some of the sensations in the body may feel achy, others numb. Some may feel tingly and fizzy, like a carbonated beverage. Others softly shimmer, as though the body were emitting a natural glow. Some feel very good. Others hurt. All of them are your body.

The good news is that sensations can be aroused, resurrected, woken up from their long sleep and welcomed back into the fold of direct and immediate experience after their long ostracism. The even better news is that we needn't do anything heroic to nudge them back into felt awareness. We just need to turn our attention to them.

## **Meditations to Awaken Feeling Presence**



### **Bringing Sensations to Life**

So . . . just let yourself feel.

Begin by turning your attention to a small area at the top of your head about the size of a large coin. Just let yourself feel whatever it is you can feel here, in this one little part of your body. A subtle tingling? A buzzing perhaps? A pain or pressure? Something stirring, moving even? Just let sensations be, as they are. No need to change or alter them in any way. No need to make them stronger or weaker than they are. To awaken the body, individual sensations need to be accepted exactly as they're first felt.

As soon as sensations appear, like stars coming out at night, they start flickering and percolating, changing their form, massing together like starlings in flight, streaming along as part of a larger current. Because they're so individually minuscule and flicker on and off with such rapidity

they appear more as a phenomenon of flow than as discrete entities. In this sense, it's more helpful to think of *sensation* not as noun, but as verb. Not as individual object, but as process in eternal flux.

Be patient. Sensations are there. Let them come to you. You can't rush them. You can't force them to awaken. They wake up at their own pace, but the relaxed focusing of attention on them starts rousing them, warming them, inviting and calling them back to felt life.

Slowly start spreading your awareness across and over the entire area of your scalp. Spread your awareness slowly, just the tiniest little bit of movement from one place to the next. What do you feel as you move your attention in this way? A shimmering, a light tingling, a buzzing, an aching throbbing, a pulsing, a pressure, a kind of tickling? The sensations may be so light as to be barely perceptible, or they may be as strong as a rushing current in a stream—so much going on in so small a space, every single little blip of sensation apparently arising out of nowhere, disappearing just as rapidly, constantly reappearing, constantly passing away again, constantly changing.

Next spread your awareness over your face, very slowly again, part by little part. Feel what's going on in your forehead—minute individual blips of sensation massing together into a common current. Sometimes you may be able to name a sensation: achy, tingly, heavy, itchy. At other times you may be aware of a feeling quality for which you don't have any words to describe. It doesn't matter. Just feel what's here to be felt, exactly as it is. No need to name it, and certainly no need to change it, to try to make it feel a certain way. By letting sensations come to awareness and then accepting them exactly as they are, they start to shift and change spontaneously, on their own. What's been hidden gets revealed, and whatever needs to be resolved gets swept up in the flow.

Keep spreading your awareness around your face. Feel into your eyebrows. And then feel into your eyeballs. When you become lost in thought, your eyes lose awareness of feeling presence. By waking up the sensations in your eyes, letting them come forward and be felt, unbidden thought melts away, right before your eyes.

Feel your nose, every little part of it, its long shaft and both individual nostrils. Spread your awareness to include the sensations in your cheeks, your temples, your jaw. Just feel them. And if, by feeling sensations, they start to change, just let them.

Move your attention to your mouth, your lips, your teeth, your tongue. Feel your chin. Feel your ears. Feel the entire head as a unit. From the outside looking in, it might look like a solid object, but from the inside feeling out, it's just sensations and wavelets, streaming and flowing, a tactile river in flux.

In this way, keep moving your awareness, part by part, through your entire body. Feel your neck and throat, your shoulders down into your arms, your elbows, your hands, each individual finger. Become aware of the feeling presence in your upper torso, starting perhaps at the top of your chest and moving down the front of your entire ribcage, rib by individual rib, deep inside into the diaphragm itself, following around the sides of your upper torso, continuing around the back of your rib cage until you come to the spinal column, and then move your awareness from one vertebra to the next, feeling everything. If you come across an unexpected sensation of strong discomfort, take an equal strong inhalation right into the sensation. Relax as much as you can as you exhale.

Feel your lower torso in the same way, the front of your abdomen, the sides of your belly wall, your lower back, and lower vertebrae.

Open to an awareness of the sensations that form your entire pelvic basin. Moving your attention slowly, feel how the texture and tone of sensations can subtly change from one small place to the next. Let yourself feel into your organs of elimination and reproduction.

Move your awareness down both of your legs, your upper legs, your knees, your lower legs, your feet, every little toe. In the beginning, move your awareness down each leg separately. As you become more adept at feeling sensations, you can start passing your awareness through both legs simultaneously.

When you feel particularly distracted in your meditation or your movements through life, it's helpful to pass your awareness, slowly, part by part, through the entire body. As mind settles and body comes more vibrantly to life, it then becomes easier to feel the entire body all at once, as a unified field of feeling presence. Once that global awareness fades or becomes again more diffuse, you can then go back to taking a tour of your body, part by individual part.

Moving your awareness through your entire body, letting yourself feel the sensations that arise in your body, is the basic technique of the medical body scans that are so successfully being promoted in hospital mindfulness programs. It's also the central practice of the powerful Burmese forms of body-oriented vipassana meditation. The more you pay attention, the more sensations appear. The more you can feel the entire body as a field of shimmering, tactile sensations and wavelets, the more awakened your body becomes.



Constantly moving your awareness through your body—like an art connoisseur perusing every square inch of a masterpiece—keeps body from falling back into a dreamy, unfelt sleep. So whether you're sitting on your cushion in meditation, driving your car, or pushing a buggy through a supermarket aisle, keep remembering to feel. Never avoid a part of your body. Never jump over an area of unfelt presence. Do your best to feel everything, every little cell, strong or weak, and appreciate how everything keeps changing. The awakened body is like a river, its sensations constantly streaming and constantly moving. The slumbering body is more of a stagnating pond, its sensations numb, heavy, hardly showing up at all.



## Opening the Portals of the Body

Alternately, you might want to take a more circuitous route through the body during which you focus your attention successively on specific points, or portals, in the body. Start by letting yourself feel two areas on either side of the spine at the level of your lower back. It doesn't matter how big or small they are. Just settle your awareness in these two locations and relax into, and let yourself feel whatever's there to be felt.

The more relaxed attention you pay to these places and the longer you're able to stay softly focusing on them, the more sensations are likely to emerge. Take your time. You may want to spend several breaths exploring each of these portals. You may want to spend several minutes.

Once you've been able to kindle awareness of feeling presence in these two spots, start moving your attention slowly upward, on either side of the spine. Feel how sensations get stimulated in the

parts of your body you're passing over as though little feet were walking along these parallel pathways. Keep moving your attention upward, until you bring it to rest in the back of the shoulder, the middle of either shoulder blade. Just open to the sensations, feeling whatever it is you can feel at these two locations of the body.

Next, pass your awareness down through the sensations on the inside of your arms, all the way down to your hands, and let your attention come to rest on the inside of both wrists. Passing your awareness from portal to portal stimulates sensation as you go. Once you've arrived at the portal, just settle in, rest, and wait for sensations to come streaming forward.

Once you've clearly registered and explored sensation in your wrists, move your awareness back up the outside of the arms, all the way over the shoulders, and let it come to rest at the neck portal on either side of the spine, at the juncture of the upper back and lower neck.

Let the two spots merge into one now as you move your attention up the back of the head, over the crown of the cranium, and let it come to rest at the top of your forehead, where your skin meets your hairline. Let yourself feel the sensations right at the surface of your forehead as well as deep inside the middle of the cranium.

The single spot breaks into two again and starts moving downward, hugging the contours of your face, your chin, your throat, spreading itself downward until it comes to rest as two spots on either side of your sternum at the level of the heart. Let yourself open to the full range of sensation in this space, and energies that you can feel at this place in your body.

And then keep dropping down, down the rest of the rib cage, down the abdomen, until the two spots come to rest on either side of the front of the pelvis. Take some time as you explore these spots and then drop down even more as your awareness passes down the front of your legs to come to rest on the outside of either ankle bone, just a bit behind and beneath the protruding bone itself.

To complete the circuit, pass your awareness up the back of your legs slowly so you can register the quality of sensations over which your attention is passing, over the buttocks, and let your attention come to rest on two spots on either side of the spine at the level of the lower back, the place where you began. And in this way, you complete one circuit through the body.

Each of these places in the body may reveal very different qualities of sensation. Some may feel completely impersonal with little or no emotional tone attached; others may feel intense and moving and poignant. Some may feel strong and surging in their presence; others may feel much subtler, almost imperceptible. As you pass your awareness through your body in this way, it's not as though you ever lose touch with the sense of the whole body. It's just that the individual places you're focusing your attention on form the temporary center of the whole body.

Constantly moving your attention—either in a relatively straight line from the top of the head to the bottom of the feet, or through following a more roundabout circuit like the one just described—keeps body alert and awake. When you can feel body all at once as a unified field of shimmering tactile sensations, do so. Whenever your awareness starts wavering, whenever unbidden thoughts sneak back in, whenever you become distracted or agitated, remember to move your awareness again through your body in an intentional manner, part by part, feeling whatever's there. Watch how the activity of the mind calms down, at times even stopping or dissolving, as you keep passing your awareness throughout your entire body, waking it up as you go.

Every one of these points is like a portal, or gate, into the mystery space of your body. At first what emerges through these portals is pure sensation: vibrating, shimmering, tingling. As you keep your relaxed attention on each individual portal, the sensation may start becoming gradually more



translucent, and then each portal may start ushering you into a feeling awareness of the vast spacious nature of the interior of body. Each portal can then become a gateway into the ground mystery itself—the substratum of being in the very center of our center where our individual separateness dissolves and we enter back, no matter how momentarily, into an embodied awareness of the nondual state, the place that Rumi referred to as union.

After you've become aware of each of the portals in sequence, you may choose to make another circuit through each of them in turn, or you may choose to feel all of them simultaneously. Feeling all of them at once strongly awakens the body, not just at the portal itself, but in the space between the portals as well.

Sometimes you can easily locate the portals, but other times you may have to let go of your expectations, relax your awareness, and explore the area to find out where the particular portal actually exists in your body. For example, sometimes the back of the shoulders will include an opening through the front of the shoulders as well. Sometimes the two areas at the juncture of the upper thoracic and lower cervical spines merge and expand to include the whole of the back of the neck or even the whole of the back of the head. Sometimes the portal in the forehead can be felt more palpably in and through the eyes themselves, out through the top of the head, or down into the throat. Sometimes the portal at the front of the chest can be more easily found as a single point rather than two separate spots. Just relax, let go, and find what you feel.

The order of the portals is quite simple: lower back, back of the shoulders, inside of the wrists, back of the neck, forehead, level of the heart, front of the pelvis, outside of the ankle bones . . . and back up to the lower back.



While contacting the quality of mind that is very much like a mirror is the topic proper of the next chapter, awakening the body to full awareness of its felt sensational presence is the prerequisite that allows that quality of mind to emerge. Rumi is quoted as saying, “Dissolve the body into vision, become seeing, seeing, seeing!”

If we want to create a mind like a mirror, we need to dissolve the body into vision, to merge our feeling presence with the visual field that you look out on. And if we wish to dissolve the body into vision, we first need to awaken it from its slumber of numbness, from its suppression of sensation, for how could we possibly dissolve the body into vision if we're not even able to feel it?

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## TWO

# Mirror Bright

*the mind is like a clear mirror*

Ordinarily we take the visual appearance of the world we look out on so completely for granted that we lose sight of any participatory role we might play in its creation. We believe that visual appearance is an intrinsic property of physical objects, that the visual field looks the way it looks whether we're looking at it or not, that it exists completely independent of any act of vision on our part. But. . . .

If a random event occurs and no one's there to *see* it (the age-old tree crashing down in the philosophical forest), has anything that we conventionally refer to as *visual* occurred?

You may have been a sophomore in high school when a teacher first asked you about the *sound* of falling trees made in a distant forest with no one around to hear it. Grudgingly and probably after much harrumphing (I mean what a ridiculous question, really!), you were forced to admit that, okay, while *something* can be said to have occurred, it couldn't properly be labeled as *sound*. For sound to occur, three conditions have to be present: a source of friction that generates soundwaves; the presence of a functioning ear in the near vicinity (and not just a human ear; animals, birds, and insects are all equally capable of hearing sound); and finally, the wide-awake consciousness, directed toward listening, of the sentient being to whom that ear belongs. If any one of these three conditions is absent, sound doesn't occur.

That much most of us can understand. It becomes far more uncomfortable, however, if we apply this same line of reasoning not to sound, but to vision. If no one was nearby in that forest when the tree fell over, did its dropping to the ground exist as a *visual* event? And just as you concluded that no sound could have occurred if no one was there to hear it, and for the exact same reasons, it couldn't have occurred as a visual event either *if no one was there to see it*.

For better or worse, we'd like to believe that the world we live in is like an eternal, preexisting stage set on which we play out our lives. But while most of us would agree that the objects of the world clearly exist on some sort of physical level, whether or not anyone's looking at them, they must exist in a form somewhat equivalent to soundwaves that, on their own, don't constitute sound. Light waves bombard and crash through the universe constantly and incessantly, but only as energetic waves, invisible until or unless someone looks at them and then—and only then—do they burst forth into visual appearance, and then only for as long as that someone keeps looking at them. When it comes to our participatory cocreation of the visual field, the New Age trope *we create our own reality* couldn't be more accurate. The world you look out on only looks the way it looks because you're looking at it, cocreating its visual appearance as you do.

What a magic show, this dazzling display of appearances! "Now you see me," says the visu-

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