

Heart Open

FOUR STEPS TO
EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY

Body Awake

susan aposhyan

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INTRODUCTION

MY FIRST MEMORY of the embodied spirituality that underlies all my work began with stars. When I was a child, the dark infinity of the sky was overflowing with them. It seemed that the universe was composed almost entirely of twinkling celestial bodies. There was also my small child's body, huddled in an old wool blanket and feeling blissfully overwhelmed by the vastness of it all. More specifically, the seeing and feeling of the stars and the vastness felt somehow continuous, as if without any separation between the little "me-ness" that was watching and the titanic size and beauty of that which I saw. My body was small, but the feelings it was hosting were as large as that sky.

Growing up in the sixties in Virginia, experiences like this were plentiful. The world was quiet enough and dark enough. Nature was strong enough to dominate my child's mind. Lying in the grasses, watching the endless circuits of the clouds. Hearing the insects conducting their business in meadows. Running through the forest that was itself an endless dance of light and leaves, filled with the symphony of many birdcalls. And then there was the water—rain, creeks, rivers, and waves—flowing over rocks, moving, always moving. Enchanting, beguiling, intoxicating, engulfing, bathing the eyes and the ears and

thereby washing through the interior of my body. Nothing was left untouched by these experiences. In having them, I was also sampling the way in which feeling and seeing and hearing and smelling and even tasting—honeysuckle, blackberries, rose hips—could take place under the aegis of a larger continuity. There was no barrier between my body and nature. I was directly absorbed into the natural world, educated by it, without a thought of separation or distinction.

In contrast, the human world seemed quite odd and disjointed, and its denizens—the people around me—hollow, unnaturally subdued, as if they were merely playing at being alive rather than actually living. As I grew older, I saw that they were making deliberate choices to ignore life, to wall themselves off from it, electing instead to live within very small parameters, and deceiving themselves and others in the process. I soon learned about the pain that came with this artificial separation of one individual self from the continuity of life. As I became intimate with the pain of my family and friends, I always saw the solution to that pain as reestablishing continuity with nature.

The perceptions I'm remembering and describing are quite visual in my mind. When I looked at nature, it seemed everywhere to belong to an effortless universal continuum. But when I looked at people, they appeared to be somehow cut off from this continuum, standing outside it like cartoon figures cut out of a drawing. Eventually I learned that this strange disconnect between people and their natural surroundings was part of a larger existential confusion in our culture. I became interested in psychology and in the possibility it offered to understand this confusion and, as a result, to help relieve human suffering.

Religion was apparently another system that was supposed to resolve the pain. I faithfully went to church as a young girl, and I watched and listened. But I simply didn't see the continuity of

healing that I beheld in nature. I didn't see the cartoon figures becoming reconnected to the universe. In my church, I really didn't see much happening at all.

Finally, on the Easter Sunday of my thirteenth year, I resolved to leave the Christian church. Watching the congregation with the exquisitely intense eye of adolescent arrogance, I determined that no one in the room, including the minister, was touched by the words or the music or the presence of other people, let alone a feeling of God. Not a single person there seemed to be in touch with the vital force of their own heart.

Less than a decade later, after time spent meditating, teaching dance, studying psychology, and practicing counseling, I would discover Body-Mind Centering®, the lifework of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. In her beautiful body of material, I found the inspiration that allowed the disparate threads of my various interests to begin slowly to weave together.

I have spent my life studying what it means to be human in all its aspects. I have studied the body, the mind, psychology, various religions, spirituality, art, anatomy, physiology, neuroscience, evolution, movement, birth, and death. I have worked with thousands of people, individually and in groups, in classes and retreats; as a psychotherapist, a bodyworker, a movement teacher, and a meditation teacher. And from all this, there is one thing I know for sure: *we are all in this together.*

One of the basic tenets of embodied spirituality is that we each have to begin where we are, as we are, with whatever is arising in this body right now. On one level, our individuality is a crazy swirl of thoughts, emotions, sensations, and beliefs happening in our bodies moment to moment. With awareness, we can emerge from this swirl into an open clarity, resonant with the world around us. From here, we can begin to work together

to wake up humanity and avert the planetary crisis that may end us. Even though we are all coming from different places, different views, we are truly all in this together.

I first began teaching about embodiment in the 1980s. At that time, the use of the term was rare. Now it is ubiquitous. Yet when people refer to the word *embodiment*, they are usually approaching the body in some cognitively dominant manner. They remain in the realm of ideas, thinking about the body and telling it what to do. All too often this realm of ideas is mixed up with mainstream cultural tropes about how the body should look, feel, and be. I want to reclaim the word for its deeper, wilder purpose.

Embodiment is something that all the other creatures on the planet exhibit and something we adult humans have systematically attempted to snuff out in ourselves. We can define embodiment as the continuous, complete, and free flow of cognition, emotion, and behavior through our bodies. Practically speaking, this means that whatever is occurring within our beings is allowed to organically express itself in our behavior. Is this dangerous stuff that leads to chaos? Not really. Through the course of this book, as we explore the physiological, evolutionary, and neurological bases of human embodiment, we will come to understand that our drive to live harmoniously with others is deeply embedded in us. Thus, as we practice embodiment, we tend to become more compassionate toward, more connected to, and more considerate of the world around us.

This mutual unfolding of inward awareness and outward expression is key to understanding the connection between embodiment and spirituality. Embodied spirituality is an approach to life that says the more familiar we become with the various aspects and layers of our lives as bodily beings, the

more connected and engaged we will be with others and with the whole world of our inner and outer experience. Perhaps not everyone would call this spirituality—and I would certainly never insist anyone do so. But my experience, and that of many others, is that the depth, intensity, and sense of wonder that results from practicing this way of being truly are best described with terms like *spirit* and *sacred*.

Embodied spirituality is an emergent discipline. As the dominance of organized religion wanes, more of us are allowing our own spiritualities to unfold from within rather than following the strictures of the patriarchal religions with which most of us grew up. This reverses a deep historical move in Western civilization wherein, as Europe transitioned from pagan traditions to Christianity, people turned away from the body and female-centered spirituality. Thus, it is not coincidental that as our cultural exploration of spirituality becomes more personal, it is simultaneously becoming more inclusive of the body.

Many approaches to psychology, spirituality, and bodywork are interested in embodiment. In order to take these approaches beyond the cognitive, we have to begin with our bodies in very direct ways. We have to spend time expanding our attention to include sensation, the language of the body. We have to learn the delicate art of allowing the body to move its physiology back to a healthy freedom. Finally, we actually need to excavate, realize, express, and clear out all the old, accumulated patterns that we have engrained in our bodies. These patterns that kept us alive and safe when they emerged often remain long after their usefulness has ended.

I have seen embodiment practices help people heal their physical ailments; resolve old, deeply embedded emotional patterns; liberate themselves from the tyranny of trauma; and go much

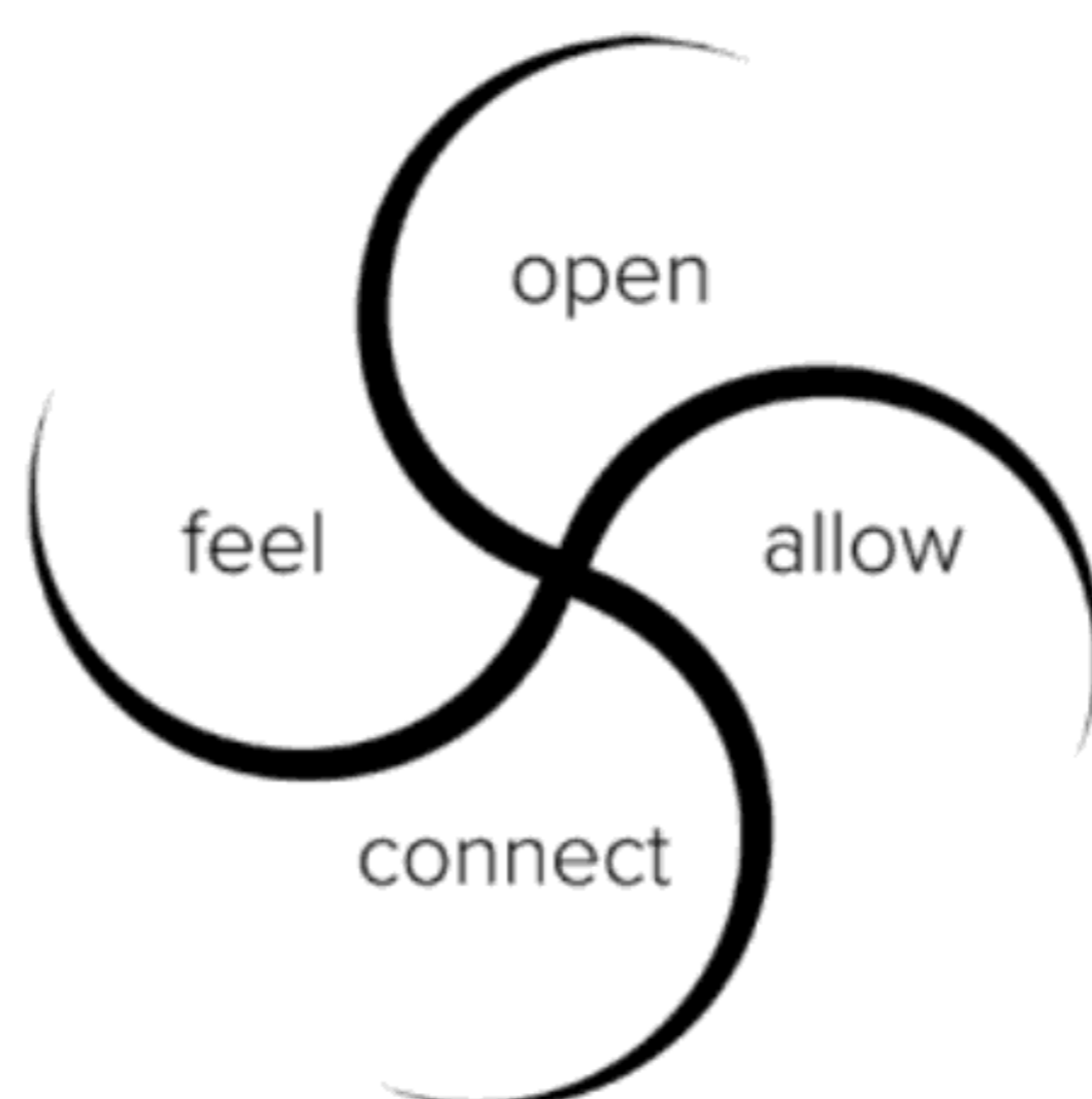
further with manifesting kindness and leadership. And I have experienced all this myself. I have become a humbler, friendlier, more optimistic person. Of course, there are no guarantees, and there will be bumps along the way, but if approached openly and maturely, deepening into embodiment seems to offer nearly infinite returns.

Embodied spirituality is emerging in myriad ways: mindfulness, meditation, centering prayer, yoga, Sufism, eco-dharma, and heart-centered practices. It can be fruitfully practiced in these and many other ways, and the teachings and practices in this book can be used to support whatever spiritual practices you already have. *Heart Open, Body Awake* presents a very body-centered approach to embodied spirituality, articulated in four steps. These steps are found throughout many approaches to spirituality. The way that we bring them together here allows one to develop from the inside out in a uniquely embodied way. Without further ado, the four steps are:

1. Open your heart.
2. Feel your body.
3. Allow what you discover in your heart and body to move you.
4. Discover the continuity between your heart, your body, and the world in its immediacy.

We can name them even more simply: open, feel, allow, connect. I love this simplicity—and yet, as you have likely experienced, this is complex terrain.

As the pinwheel in the figure opposite suggests, these steps are not meant to be understood merely in a linear way. Indeed, although I list them as concrete steps and refer to them that way throughout the book, the “steps” are actually both actions and states of being, with all the complexity, ambiguity, and nuance



that lived states of being inevitably entail. For this reason, you will find that the four steps, though loosely aligned with the four parts of this book, all intertwine with each other. They are sequential in one sense but more deeply are the warp and weft of the whole book, which is focused on helping you slowly unpack each of these states of being through stories, practices, and theoretical explanations. Though the four steps sound simple, they are running against the habits of our egoic selves. If we want to develop a truly embodied approach to spirituality, we have to practice each of these states of being in their myriad facets.



Part One of this book, “Heart of Humanity,” introduces the magic of the human heart, some of its physiology, and some practices to begin exploring it. Obviously, this section is most explicitly focused on opening the heart, but the other three steps of feeling, allowing, and connecting are intrinsically involved.

Part Two, “Body of Life,” initiates our discussion of feeling, the second step, and also introduces the third step—allowing our authentic expression through movement, sensation, and

physiology. Further attention is given to allowing our bodily experience permission to express itself and to how this process of feeling and allowing begins to dissolve the walls of our individual encapsulation and result in a sense of oneness with the world. I often refer to that oneness as “the unitive state”—the reality that each of our hearts really is the center of the universe.

Part Three, “Deepening and Blossoming,” fleshes out further details of feeling your body—a tour of the inner anatomical world and some of its access points. Part Three introduces Embodiment Practice as a formal practice approach that I have developed over the last four decades. While there are many embodiment practices, the Embodiment Practice presented here is intended to be an all-inclusive tool to reintegrate the adult human body and mind. Not only does Embodiment Practice include feeling all the parts of your body as they present themselves to you, it is also the best method I know for exploring the third step of embodied spirituality: allowing the sensations you feel to move through your being in their own unique way. I share more details and specifics regarding Embodiment Practice here than I have done before in written form. This begins with my definition of embodiment, given as an antidote to the oversimplification of its current use in popular culture, and continues through a step-by-step introduction to Embodiment Practice so you can begin to practice it on your own. I hope the numerous guided practices in Part Three will help you experience how step two (feeling) evolves into step three (allowing), which opens onto step four (connecting).

Part Four, “The Path of Opening and Connecting,” completes the cycle by looking at how the fruition of connecting, the fourth and final step, manifests. There are chapters on spiritual fruition, applying embodiment in death and dying, and a chap-

ter to support you in using embodiment and the four steps in your personal spiritual development.

Over the last twenty years of study and practice, I published two books that dealt with body-mind integration and its applications in psychotherapy. After finishing my second book, I felt ready to write about how spirituality was a hidden key to understanding the paradox of our humanity, which somehow spans the animal and the divine. I dreamed of a book that would reveal the profundity of our human drive to unite those polarities—body and mind, creaturely and spiritual. Necessarily, it would open and close with a study of what I've come to believe is the essential link between body and spirit: the human heart. It is this book that you hold in your hands.



PART ONE

Heart of Humanity

1

DISCOVERING THE HEART

The way is not in the sky. The way is in the heart.

—SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA

I ONCE DISSECTED the body of a very interesting man. One of his ears appeared to have been bitten off by human teeth. The ear was sewn back on but sloppily, slightly off its original spot. He had some tattoos that seemed to offer clues about his life. I can't recall the specifics, but I remember my fantasized images: waterside bars and dockworkers. And he was exceptionally strong in one of his psoas muscles, the deepest of the hip flexors—a heavy equipment operator? But his heart held the most striking anomaly of all. He had a hard calcification, a little smaller than half a baseball, on the side of his heart. I was amazed that someone could live with such a growth. There was no evidence that this had killed him. He had lived, literally, with a hardened heart.

There seem to be so many reasons and ways in which we harden or close our hearts. We shut down. We inure ourselves to loss and fear. We prioritize safety and comfort over our emotional realities. Many of us are afraid to feel sensation in our hearts. When we feel such sensation, we wonder, “Is that

a heart attack? Is there something physically wrong with my heart?” Consciously feeling our physical hearts can be a step toward courageous awareness. When people are suffering from a terrible heartbreak or loss, their hearts often ache. I wonder if this ache is the sensation of the heart tissue, which is muscular, cramping dramatically as it opens to its new life.

I heard a story about a girl preparing for her bat mitzvah. During her study, her rabbi kept telling the class that they were placing the teachings on their hearts. Finally, this girl shot up her hand and asked the rabbi, “Why are we placing the teachings on our hearts? Why don’t we just put the teachings into our hearts?” The rabbi responded, “Oh, well, that’s because neither you nor I have the power to place the teachings in our hearts, but if we place them on our hearts then when our hearts break, the teachings will fall in.”

We’re all familiar with the phrase “open your heart,” but what does that really mean? In order to understand opening our hearts experientially and to take it on as a practice, we first need to establish a sense of basic familiarity. We need to discover our hearts.

Our hearts are constantly opening and closing. This happens on many levels. On the most obvious level, the chambers of our hearts open and close with every heartbeat as they take in our blood and then send it on. Our hearts are primarily composed of cardiac muscle, and like all muscle, the heart’s fibers shorten and lengthen. The muscle composing each chamber of the heart shortens and lengthens with each beat. Beyond this, some of the cardiac muscle fibers can be shortened ongoingly. This is one way that our hearts can be relatively closed. When our hearts break emotionally, this muscle fiber that has been chronically shortened can lengthen and join back in with the pulsation of

the heart. Our hearts can break open physically and emotionally. They can shine forth. The fibers that were habitually shortened can lengthen, even after decades.

Cardiac muscle shortens and lengthens in the same way skeletal muscle does, through filaments sliding together and apart. Hold your hands out in front of you and let your fingers slide together and apart. When a group of skeletal muscle fibers stays shortened, we call it a spasm or a cramp. If we gently move the cramping area, eventually it joins back into the symphony of shortening and lengthening muscle. In our hearts, the muscle movement is involuntary, responding to a complex of neurological and chemical inputs. When we want to shorten or lengthen skeletal muscle, it suffices to merely have the intention. I see my glass of water. I want to pick it up. All of the muscles in my arm respond accordingly.

With cardiac muscle, the input is less direct, more complex. We might think, "I want to open my heart." For some of us, nothing might happen at first. For others, our hearts might magically respond. Over time, all of us can slowly weave together a series of neural networks that will allow the cardiac muscle to respond to our intention.

Another way we open and close our hearts is by dilating and constricting the blood vessels that circulate within and around the heart. Our heart cells produce a hormone called atrial natriuretic peptide (ANP), which is involved in the constriction and dilation of our blood vessels. I wonder whether, when we feel a sudden flush of heart opening, this happens through a release of ANP. Sadly, this is not a question that has been explored scientifically, so it remains speculative. Whatever the case, opening our hearts feels good, and with it comes a greater ability to connect with others.

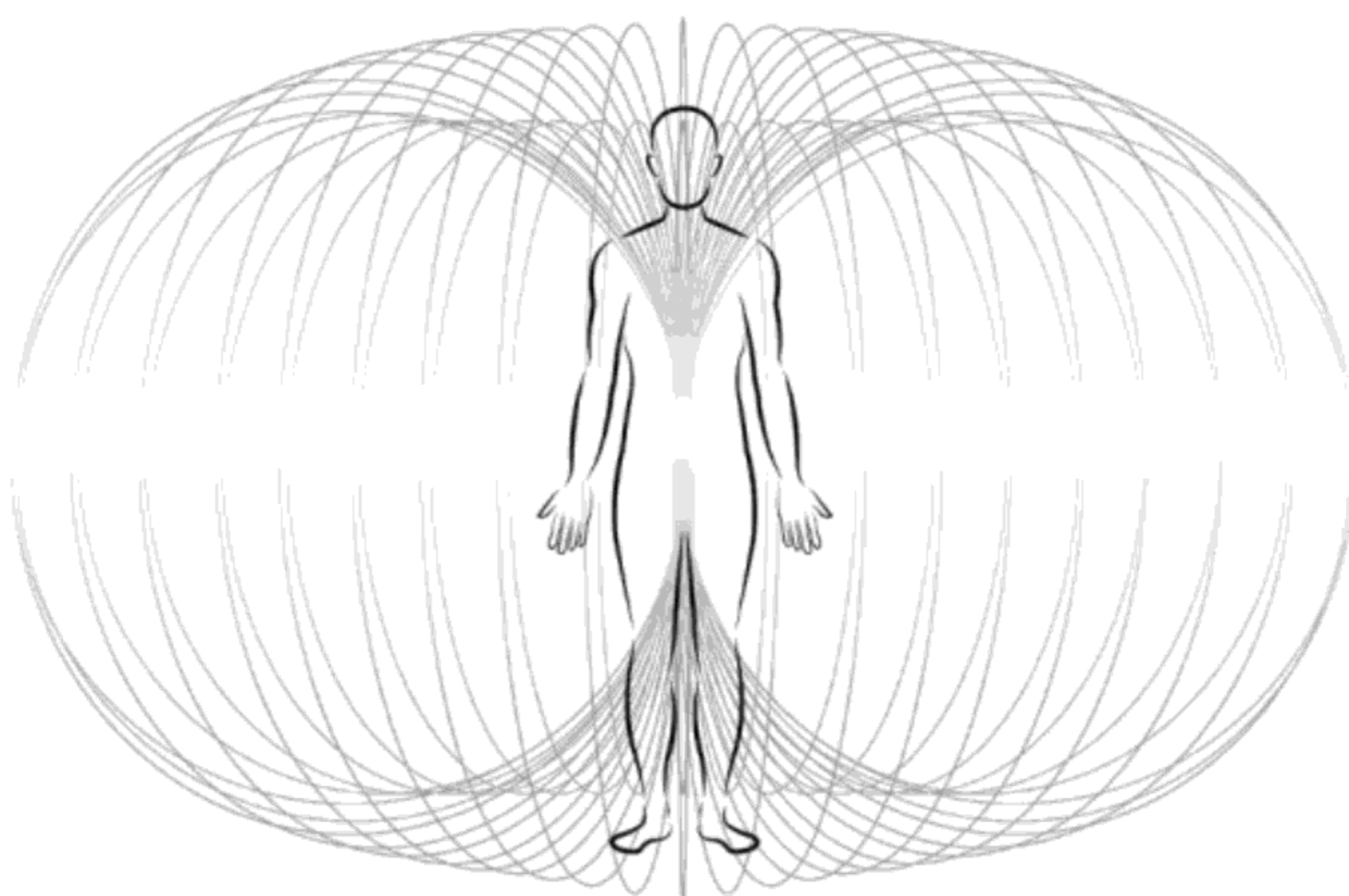
When our hearts break emotionally, we can understand it in

a way that makes us smaller: “I am bad. The world is bad. Love is always painful. I’ll never love again.” When we respond this way, then our hearts close more.

Awakening the heart seems essential to all spiritual disciplines. We bring our hands together in front of our hearts to pray. In interfaith dialogues, I have witnessed extreme fundamentalists agreeing that we each have to discover for ourselves what it is that touches our hearts.

On a physical level, the heart is an amazing organ. It has the strongest electromagnetic field of any organ within the body. The heart’s electrical field is between fifty and sixty times stronger than that of the brain, which is the second strongest field generator in the human body. The heart’s electromagnetic field is *five thousand* times stronger than that of the brain. This field radiates out from the heart in a torus shape, including the whole body and much of the space around it.

William Harvey, the English physician who first delineated the physiological role of the heart in his 1628 book, *On the*



Electromagnetic field of the heart

Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals, likened the heart to the king or the sun of the body. Modern culture has shifted that place of honor from the heart to the brain. We have placed reason and intellect above the heart. Neuropsychologist and author Paul Pearsall sees this as a fundamental confusion, similar to early cultural beliefs that the sun orbits around the earth. Our cultural fixation on the brain is one reason why so many of us need to discover or rediscover our hearts—a basic sense of familiarity has been lost. But that doesn't mean that the brain is irrelevant, any more than the earth became irrelevant once we learned that it actually orbits the sun and not vice versa. The brain and the heart are intricately connected.

THE DANCE BETWEEN THE BRAIN AND THE HEART

Which of these organs is more powerful? The answers are less clear-cut than they might first appear. The brain gathers information from a wide swath of internal and external sensory data, but it bases its decisions on habit and repetition. This is fundamental to the brain's physiology.

“Neurons that fire together wire together”—this is the original and still fundamental description of brain functioning posited by Donald Hebb in 1949. This principle is so central to neuropsychology that we call it Hebbian theory. In other words, the nervous system is strongly based on conditioning. Repeating a behavior is much easier than changing a behavior because of this tendency.

Furthermore, the nervous system doesn't have its own sensory nerve endings. It can't feel itself and therefore doesn't recognize whether its decisions *feel* harmonious or not. Finally, once we give our rational selves the ultimate power over our

decisions, we tend to ignore any information that counters rationality. The rational brain is not good at listening to the heart or any other part of us when it is used to having unilateral power. We all know the feeling of the brain obsessively telling us what needs to be done right now—never backing off and not easily compromising until we have satisfied its demands.

In contrast, the heart is very spacious and relaxed with its sense of direction. If we ignore what feels right in our hearts, they will not jump up and down to get our attention. In fact, it can take us years to circle back around and remember that making a particular choice never really felt completely right. The ideal situation seems to be one in which the brain takes the role of advising the heart. With the brain as the consultant and the heart as the final arbiter, we arrive at decisions that both make sense and feel right.

The HeartMath Institute, a consulting and research group out of Boulder Creek, California, has been studying heart-brain communication for almost three decades.¹ Employing electroencephalograms, electrocardiograms, and other measurements, researchers have found that when our awareness is centered in our hearts, we are calmer, happier, more resourceful, and more positively connected to others. One of their mottoes is “smart brain, wise heart.”

OPEN MIND

I do not believe in anything, but when I experience something,
I know it to be true. —CARL JUNG

When we give our hearts the opportunity to lead, it allows our minds to relax. Thoughts naturally decrease. The same thing occurs with attending to our bodies. Preliminary neuroscientific

research indicates that the more awareness one has of sensation, the less one is thinking. In embodied spirituality, we open our hearts and feel the body as a gateway to working with the mind. This eases the inherently delicate and complex task of working with our minds. Since the brain has no sensory nerve endings, we often don't feel when we are treating our mental selves aggressively or even mechanically. We need to lean gently into allowing our minds to open. How did we move away from open-mindedness in the first place? We had it when we were babies.

Babies are such mystics. Before they can talk, before they think in words, they stare at the world with an incredibly open gaze. They see clearly, without labeling or compartmentalizing the world. For them, life is all a miraculous display. That is open-mindedness.

Once we begin talking and thinking in words, the world changes so dramatically and so decisively. That mystical mind becomes lost to most of us. The two-year-old mind of "no" and "mine," "this" and "that," sets in and lays down deep, deep roots.

This developmental change parallels our shift as a species, out of embeddedness in nature and into entanglement in human culture, the shift from animal mysticism to egoic materialism. This is not an argument to go back to nature, to return to our animal natures. It is a call to continue in our personal development toward an embodied humanity, a culture that is able to play with our ability to conceptualize without losing our direct experience.

In these last few thousand years, we have left behind a way of being that was billions of years old. We have moved from being embedded in our world to inhabiting an almost virtual reality, which we are compelled to manipulate. Once we began to label and compartmentalize, the fundamental duality of self

and other set in. Either consciously or unconsciously, we are constantly angling toward survival and personal advantage. From this, the pursuit of comfort ensues, and then it is a nearly hopeless mess.

How do we practice opening our minds?



Seeing from the Heart

Pause.

Feel your body. Feel your heart. Rest into your heart and see if it wants to open a bit.

Open your eyes and let them rest on whatever is in front of them. If you can catch it, watch your mind orienting to and labeling what it is seeing. Allow your vision to rest on whatever it is seeing, and give your mind permission to see the colors and light without labeling. Have a sense that you are seeing from your heart.

This practice needs repetition; it evolves over time. It took me a long time to be able to consciously catch the labeling process. As it develops, you can practice hearing from your heart and feeling bodily sensations from your heart. Even tasting and smelling can come from the heart. This helps us bypass the labeling process and open the mind.

.....

Humans are natural storytellers. No matter how open our minds get, our consciousness has a biological tendency to contextualize, to make meaning, to tell ourselves a story about what is happening in our lives and on our paths. Some stories limit

us: “This is just the way I am. I can’t change it. The world is against me.” And some stories open the way to continue our development: “This is what I want. I can feel that I am headed in the right direction. Even though I can’t discern the future, I want to keep growing, learning, and healing.”

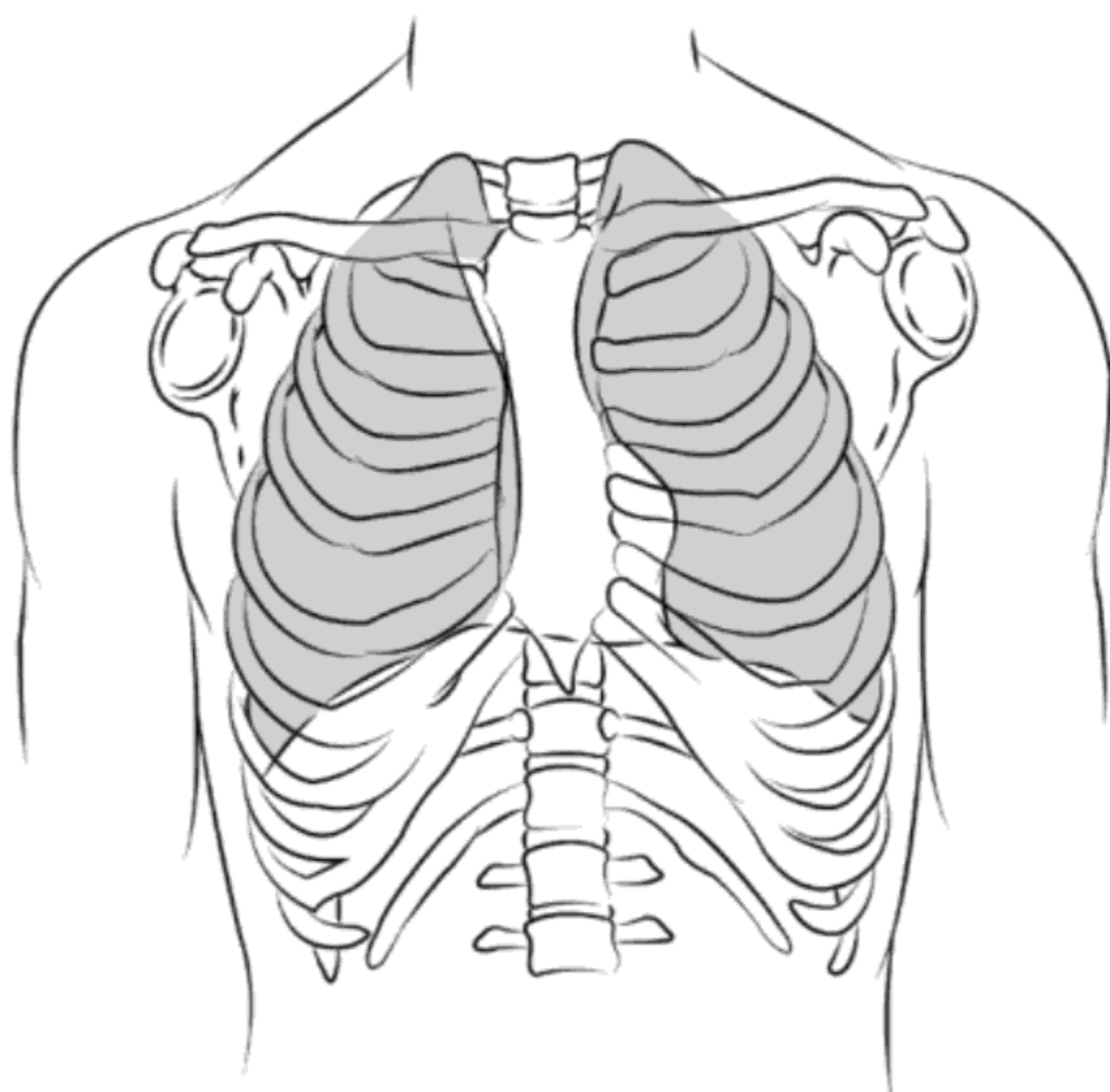
At any given moment, our view of ourselves is either opening the way or obstructing it. Even when we are completely mired in negative emotion or challenge, we can keep opening, telling ourselves, “Right now, I feel overwhelmed, lost, and stuck, but I will get through this, and then I will continue on my path.” Treating ourselves kindly during our challenges is an essential aspect of embodied spirituality. It is a practice, and it is one that benefits immeasurably from being centered in the heart. Notice when you are being harsh or critical toward yourself. Change the narrative. Speak kindly. Stay open to what you are learning in each moment.

On a larger level, we can work with being more open with ourselves about who and what we are. What is ego? What is self? What is your true self? What is your conditioned self? At some points along your path, it might benefit you to give yourself permission to just be yourself: “You be you. Live your life.” At other points, your heart might open so fully that your awareness of being a particular person becomes inconsequential in the face of being a part of this vast and beautiful universe. Open your heart, open your mind. Let whatever wants to happen, happen.

THE WHOLE BODY IS HEART

Most people think of the heart as being on the left side of the chest, but in actuality, the heart fills the whole center of the chest. There is only a bit more on the upper left side. The heart is behind the entire length of the sternum, or breastbone. Take

a moment and touch the full length of your sternum firmly from top to bottom, visualizing as you do that your heart is right behind it.

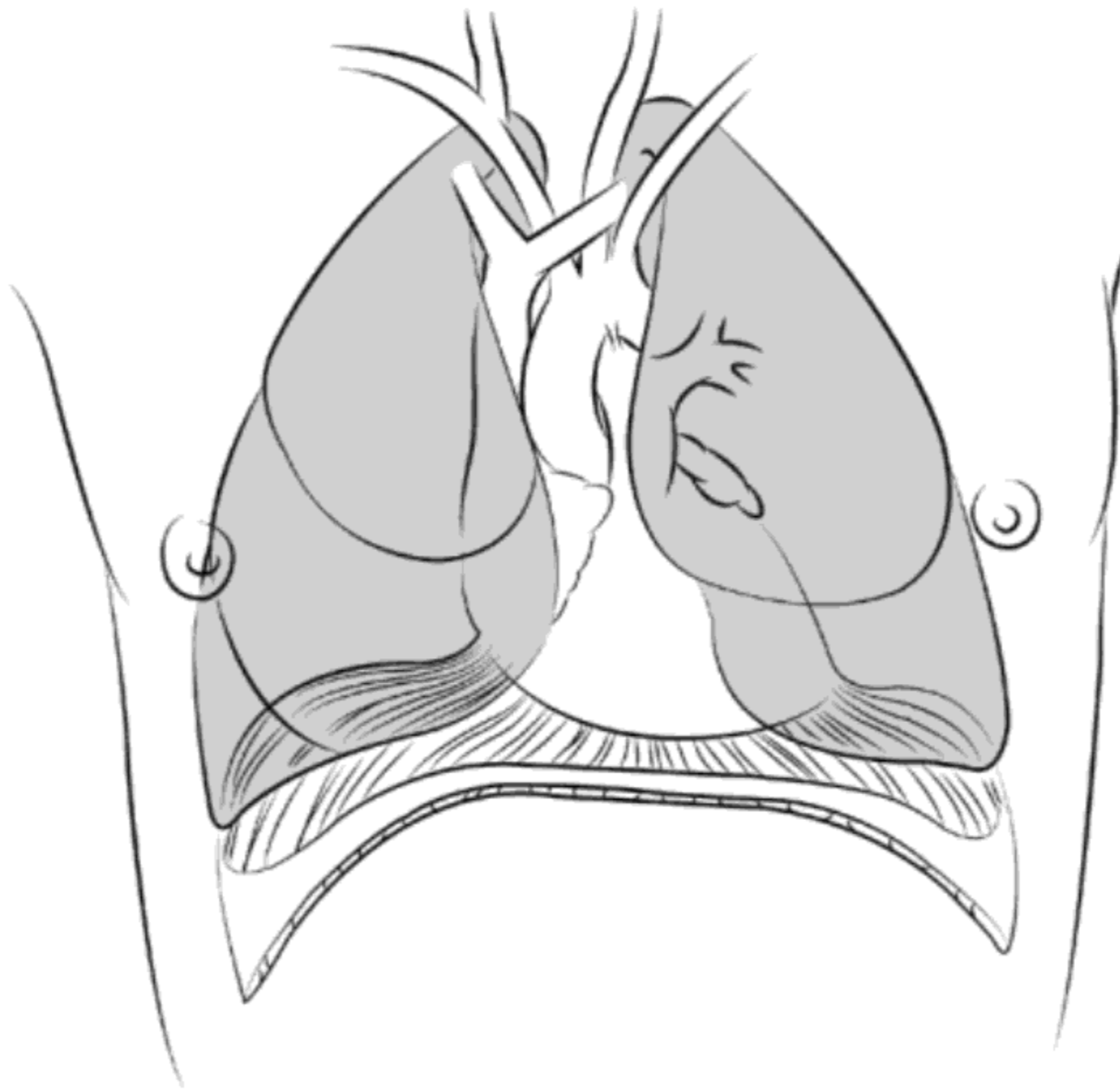


Lung tissue in gray. The white area between the lungs is the small portion of the heart that shows through the lungs' embrace.

Our lungs embrace our hearts, making them truly the wings of the heart. The lungs and heart work so closely together that at times, in a heart transplant, the heart and lungs of the donor are transplanted together into the recipient.

When I first removed and dissected the calcified heart of the tattooed cadaver, I was surprised to see how his lungs remained wrapped around his heart. I imagined that they would flop open, but that was not the case. The organs are far too intrinsically connected for that.

Similarly, the vessels of the circulatory system and the heart work together so inextricably that, in a certain sense, the whole



body is heart. Once a very unusual man was telling me about his experiences with “unexpected intimacy.” He said that in those moments, he felt “heart all over.”

In Chinese medicine, the heart is the center of our beings, governing the rest of the body, all the other major organs and systems. How does it govern? By listening to the blood—its rhythms, its constituents, all the subtle information coming from every cell in the body. The heart guides by resting fully in its place in the center.

In an emotional or energetic sense, the heart is the center of our beings. From the perspective of biomechanics, our center of gravity is lower—the *dan tien*, a Chinese anatomical concept that is essential in martial arts practice. In the most limited definition, the *dan tien* is the center of gravity, a spot resting a few finger widths below the navel in the center of the pelvis. But in the most expansive meaning, the *dan tien* includes the entire central channel of the body. A traditional instruction in the

practice of tai chi is to rest the “heartmind” in the dan tien. This ensures that we do not disrupt the heart in its resting centrality, nor do we uproot ourselves from the earth. To truly place the heartmind in the dan tien, we must feel our connection to the earth and feel how each part of ourselves rests on the support below it. To fully rest in the support of the earth, each body part, including the feet and the pelvic floor, must yield to gravity. Then all the visceral organs also yield, resting dynamically rather than passively or in a collapsed manner. In this way, the heart is supported by all of the body, especially that which is directly below it.

Secondarily, to rest the heartmind in the dan tien means that we remain centered in our very core rather than getting pulled out of our centers or skewed to the left or the right. As always with the heart, this refers to our literal and physical centers as well as our awareness and presence.

To begin to feel into the heart more fully, let us begin with feeling the beating of our hearts.



Heart Pulsation Meditation

Let yourself sit, lie, or stand in a relaxed and symmetrical position, one in which your whole spine is as long and relaxed as possible.

Get quiet and still enough to feel the beating of your heart. Place your hand on your heart and feel the pulsation with your hand. Even though the heart is in the center of the chest, it is harder to feel the pulsation through the bone. There is a bit more heart protruding to the left of the sternum than to the right. Try placing your

hand there. Notice the movement of your chest echoing the beat. If it is difficult to feel your pulse this way, you can put your hand on your carotid artery at the side of your neck or even the radial artery at your wrist. When you are ready, remove your hand and sense the pulsation directly. Spend as long as you like feeling the beat of your heart.

Rest your mind in this sense of pulsation. Relax your body into the rhythm so that your whole body awareness becomes this one pulse.

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When you are done, notice how you are feeling and why you stopped when you did. What happened during this heart meditation? Was there a shift in your physical body, in your energetic body? Was there a shift in your state of mind? What would your life be like if you spent more time with your attention centered at your heart? What if your attention was always heart-centered? Could this simple exercise change your way of living?

More than any other aspect of embodied spirituality, I have found that living more fully from our hearts is *the single most powerful step* for many of us. The shift from thinking of the heart abstractly to actually feeling physical heartbeats can transform us in the moment. Try it when you are already in a fairly present state and let it deepen. Then try it when you are emotionally stuck and see what happens.

Early in an embryo's gestation, the mother's arterial blood enters its body with the rhythm of her pulse rate. That fluid rhythm moves through the body, and cardiac tubes form around it. The heart forms on the basis of the mother's pulse. The heart is a

relational structure from its very inception. As the embryo continues to develop, the cardiac tube twists and folds itself into the four chambers of the mature heart.

Those four chambers are composed of multiple layers of spiral muscles. This means that structurally, the heart is relatively complex. Similarly, our ability to feel emotions in the heart is also complex. Our hearts can feel angry and hurt at the same time. Sad and courageous. Terrified and calm. Over time, as we practice feeling our hearts, we can start to notice what emotions are residing there at any given moment. With enough awareness, we can start to feel multiple layers of emotion in our hearts.

2

WISE HEART, EGOIC HEART

When the heart is able to take in all that is presented
in openness, knowledge is able to become wisdom.

—ÉLISABETH ROCHAT DE LA VALLÉE

WHAT ARE EMOTIONS really? We can romanticize emotions, thinking of them as some sort of poetic flourish unique to humans. We can reduce them to obscurations of mental clarity. The reality revealed to us through affective neuroscience is that they are essential to life. Fear is the function of protecting ourselves from danger. Anger is territorial defense. Love is an elaboration of our drive to procreate and sustain the species. What we call emotion is really the function of living that has evolved from animal life.

Psychologists have studied emotions for over a hundred years now. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of conflicting theories about the origin of emotion from the nascent field of physiological psychology. Do emotions begin in the mind or the body? The American psychologist and philosopher William James and the Danish physician Carl Lange argued, in what became known as the James-Lange theory of emotion, that physiological arousal comes first and the experience of emo-

tion second. “The more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble,” wrote James, “and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be.”² A generation later, the American physiologist Walter Cannon and his student Philip Bard contended the opposite in the Cannon-Bard theory—that emotional arousal begins in the brain before it resonates in the body.

Now we understand that both are true: waves of overlapping ripples head in both directions, mind-body and body-mind, top-down and bottom-up. The challenge is that with the comforts and complexities of modern life—enduring constant social pressures yet having lots of time on our hands without needing to fulfill survival requirements—these ripples linger in our minds, hearts, and bodies to unnecessary and unhelpful degrees. All of our bodily reactions to our thoughts are predicated on the vivid behavior of animals in the wild. When we become afraid of displeasing the boss, we easily become as physically activated as if there were a bear to run away from. We must learn to recognize, correct, and curtail our confusing thoughts and beliefs—“Nobody likes me. I’m unlucky. I’m doomed to unhappiness. I’ll be alone and unloved.” Simultaneously we have to complete and release the bodily energy and patterns of emotion that are unspent as there is no bear to run away from.

Emotions are often attended by strong sensations, even overwhelming movements of sensation sweeping through our bodies. If there is a bear to run away from, then we use this energy to run our fastest, careening through the woods with greater agility than if there were no threat. When there is no bear, as our brains recognize the superfluous intensity, they seek to repress it to restore peace and order within our bodies. Ironically, this

repression is only partially effective and results in the emotions continuing to persist past their utility. Often, we cognitively fabricate a new reason to be frightened: “Well, there’s no bear, but I’m going to be late getting down this mountain.” Once we have created a new motivation for the fear, as our emotions persist, we escalate cognitively even further: “If I’m late, my friends are going to be angry.” And further: “Really angry. They might never speak to me again.” The unspent adrenaline and other physiological responses react to the cognitions in a perfect storm—an ever-enlarging snowball of body-mind escalation.

Commonly, we are taught to downplay emotions—tune them out, repress them, try to rationalize our way out of them. When we find out there is no bear and perhaps not even a lesser danger, if we can calm ourselves down, that is helpful. But what about all the activation in our bodies? The art of working with emotions is being able to express what needs to be expressed and allow emotions to move out of our bodies. Often this takes an active embodiment practice since most of us are so trained in repression. (If you are new to this concept of allowing emotions to move out of the body, you will have lots of opportunity to work with it using the embodiment practices presented in Parts Two and Three of this book.)

And what about spirituality? How do we contextualize our emotions from the point of view of spiritual development? Most spiritual approaches encourage us to tame our emotions, to avoid wallowing or getting swept away. As we become more grounded in sensation, we can take a more challenging but more fruitful path. We can become able to feel emotion, let it move through our bodies, and allow it to transform and expand.

Some emotions refer back to the individual self. They arise because we each have a self, and feeling these emotions

reinforces our sense of self, motivates us to understand, protect, and preserve ourselves. I call these *egoic emotions*—sadness, anger, fear, and all their derivatives. Egoic emotions condense us into ourselves and easily convolute into defenses against the environment. Sadness and all its derivatives can move seamlessly into victimization. Anger and its by-products can become aggression. Fear can become withdrawal, aggression, or paralysis.

In contrast, other emotional states are naturally expansive—joy, love, connection, peace, presence. While it *is* possible to twist these expansive emotions too tightly, trying to hoard them as personally affirmative little goodies, they don't easily lend themselves to that purpose. Instead, they can naturally act as bridges into the unitive states, states of connectedness and interdependency, which I call “liberating emotional states.”

The complexity of the heart is that we can feel multiple egoic emotions within it at the same time, *and* if we practice emotional heart awareness, there can be an ongoing, simultaneous backdrop of liberating emotional states—wisdom, peace, and presence! Finally, as we become skilled in this practice, we can allow egoic emotions to transform into liberating states.

The first step is recognizing the wise heart.



Discovering the Wise Heart

Take a few moments to center in yourself. Feel your body and its sensations. Become aware of how you are breathing. Notice if there are any important physical or emotional issues that need attention.

When you feel ready, think of a big question, develop-

mental challenge, or dilemma in your life right now. As you bring this to mind, see how your body responds to the thought. Notice the sensations of your response and the shape of the gesture they form.

Acknowledging that, settle back into your whole self. Ask your heart, “Can you help me with these feelings?” Feel the subtle shifts that arise in response to that question. Let your whole being settle into the feeling of having your heart embrace and support the thought you introduced.

Ask yourself what wisdom or truth your heart is offering you at this moment. Wait until words form.

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I did this inside myself as I wrote it. I thought of a dilemma with one of my family members, how to support them during a big, scary transition in their life. Very subtly, I felt the front of my heart draw together and up, a little grasping gesture, an expression of concern. This feeling extended from my heart up into my throat and face as well. These feelings were an egoic emotional mix of fear, sadness, and concern. When I asked my heart to lovingly hold those feelings, I felt my whole heart spread out in all directions, as if opening its arms to the smaller emotions. I let the two types of feeling rest together for a while. I asked for words to describe the message coming from my heart of wisdom: “It’s going to be okay. Love, wait, rest.”

As we practice feeling our hearts over time, the relationship between our wise hearts and our emotional hearts can clarify and become more articulate. Check in as often as you want. How is your heart feeling? Check with all the parts of your heart that you can identify. Try feeling the front of your heart, the

center of your heart, the top of your heart, the bottom, and the sides.

The back of the heart is connected to the spine via a fairly thick layer of connective tissue. This tissue does not have a lot of sensory nerve endings or blood supply. It is quiet without a lot of sensation. In this way, the back of the heart is a place where we can tuck away emotions we don't wish to deal with. And we can forget about them for indefinitely long periods of time until something intensifies.

The top of the heart is directly involved in our throats, speech, and facial expressions. We sometimes practice pushing down on the top of our hearts, repressing that part so as not to reveal ourselves to the world. Taking the lid off the top of the heart can be a joyful relief. Opening the top of our hearts is often associated with lightheartedness.

Checking in with our hearts and clearing any emotional dilemmas can become a daily practice, individually and relationally. This was prescribed in Chinese medicine as early as 500 B.C.E., in the time of Confucius. Here is a description of the heart and heart practice from the "Neiye," or "Inner Training," chapter of the *Guanzi*, an ancient Chinese philosophical text:

When our Hearts are well regulated, our senses are well regulated too.

When our Hearts are at rest, our sense organs are at rest too.

What regulates them is the Heart.

What sets them at rest is the Heart.

(That is to say) within the Heart there is another Heart.

The art of the heart is to empty the heart every day.³

On a personal level, what actions do you need to take so that your heart can open and relax? Relationally, what do you need to communicate with others to relieve your heart of any worries each day?

Of course, we must also clear any dilemmas in the rest of our beings as well. If our bodies or brains build up too much stress, we are not able to fully support our hearts. We constrict the full circulation of our hearts. Feel what physical and emotional changes you can begin to make, so that eventually your body becomes a living throne for the relaxed majesty of your heart.

In this way, we clear our bodies to support the heart. And we clear our hearts so they can shine like the sun!



Sophia,⁴ a twenty-something student of embodied spirituality, contacted me, distraught about a recent breakup. I had always been impressed by her unique combination of innocence and wisdom. Now she was sobbing, barely able to speak through the pain. I sat with her, feeling my own heart aching for her and with her. At the same time, around the ache, my heart felt big and expansive, calm, with a deep knowing that she would not only survive this loss, but grow and thrive by learning from it. This was my heart of wisdom holding the space for both of our emotions.

When Sophia was finished crying, I suggested she feel her body. She felt her heart was the center of the strongest sensations. There she felt a swirl of conflicting emotions—anger, pain, confusion. She wasn't eating or sleeping well and not performing well at her job. She experienced her heart as betrayed and betraying, untrustworthy in that it had led her into yet another disastrous relationship. When she recognized that this was her

small, emotional heart, she settled down and felt more deeply, looking for the wiser, bigger heart of awareness. As she rested into the sensations of her chest, she felt something open deep inside, “as if the clouds parted and my chest was suddenly open and full of light, clarity.” From this place, she realized that her ex was lost in confusion, unavailable for a real relationship.

As we talked through all this and she continued to feel her heart and her body, she allowed many parts of herself to communicate with each other. She felt relaxed and trusting of herself and her ability to be by herself for a while, without rushing into the next relationship. She felt she could touch back into her body awareness, and particularly her heart, over the next days and weeks as this process evolved within her. A deeper commitment emerged to check in with her heart’s wisdom the next time she felt curious about exploring intimacy. Now she could soothe all those disturbing emotions just by staying present with this larger heart awareness.

3

THE WISDOM OF EMOTIONS

WHEN I WAS growing up in the southern United States in the 1960s, Jim Crow segregation laws strongly affected everyone's lives. I went to a church where everyone was very white in looks and behavior. Everyone spoke in hushed voices. Their faces were either neutral or held a faint smile. The women held their purses and limbs very close in and admonished the children to do likewise. The men had a couple of inches of greater leeway for movement, but not that much. As I remember it, I was uncomfortable with all this feeling of life and emotion being so tightly contained. I also remember being uncomfortable because I was darker than anyone else there.

In contrast, when I happened to go past black churches during Sunday service, I was mesmerized. Wow, so much noise, movement, music, interaction! So much emotion! I wanted to go in so badly, but I wasn't dark enough to go in without disrupting what was happening. Those memories have stayed with me all these years. I was a bit too dark for one church, but it was too contained for me. And I was too light for the other. Although the racial dimension of these experiences is important, it's not my focus here. The key is the difference in emotional expressivity, but the general pattern was not lost on me as a child.

Remembering this helped me understand why I had to leave that church I grew up in, and these memories helped me envision the possibility of embodied spirituality.

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION, REPRESSION, AND HABITUATION

In animals, behavior and emotion are relatively continuous. In the study of affective neuroscience, we see that fundamental behaviors such as territory defense and food seeking are the basis of human emotions.⁵ Even when there is nothing tangible to protect, we humans may experience fear. Even when all our needs are met, we often experience desire. Beyond manifesting behavioral tendencies as emotion, the human brain is able to pick and choose how it manifests emotion. The unique ability of the adult human brain is the possibility of expressing or repressing emotions. Over the course of our lifetimes, we create a personality structure of rehearsed repertoires of emotional expression and repression.

In his concept of *repetition compulsion*, Sigmund Freud helped us start to understand how much of our behavior is acting out unconscious emotional patterns. This is the most blatant arena of ego activity. Our egos are these habitual patterns and our identification with them—"I am this kind of person who behaves and feels these ways" over and over again. Many of us will pursue this kind of activity until it kills us, literally. This is the conditioned self that has wrapped its web around the true self and true nature. Our bodies are the clay that is molded by our habitual behavior and our conditioned concepts of ourselves, and there are layers and layers of this.

Awareness in the moment brings us into direct contact with what we are doing and feeling and thinking now. Contemplating

our lives over time allows us to see the patterns. Are we always in the role of victim, aggressor, or bystander? What are our beliefs about who we are? About what the world is? What do we identify as “me”? When did we learn these patterns? How do we reinforce them? What postures do our hearts take to support these stances and attachments? All of this has been relegated to the realm of psychology and therapy, but clearly it is the structure of the ego and, therefore, the path of moving through our habitual emotional patterns. These are part of the conditioned self. As we let these habitual patterns unwind, we move toward the true self and true nature. In this way, emotional awareness and unwinding habitual pattern are the substance of any spiritual path. Through emotional awareness, habitual patterns unwind. This is liberation.

Some people see the spiritual path almost as a random egoic demolition process. Just smash the hell out of that thing called ego! Get rid of it as quickly as you can! Sadly, it seems that you have to be pretty evolved for this kind of approach to be helpful. Otherwise, it just makes you crazy.

Habitual patterns are not just the trappings of ego, they are also the ground of our everyday sanity. It is a good thing that we get up every morning and clothe and feed ourselves. How can we examine our patterns, discern what is working optimally and what is no longer functional? How can we sort through what to accept and what to work through? How can we work with ourselves with love and awareness to blossom in our fullest potential, shedding the old patterns gently yet courageously?

For most of us, this deep level of growth and change is a very slow process. As Arnold Mindell, the founder of process-oriented psychology, said to me once, “We change so slowly, but there’s so much richness in the circling, don’t you think?” The main point here is to be gentle and gracious with ourselves.

There is utility in seeing the continuity between our personal psychological and emotional growth and our spiritual development. It is a continuum. As Thomas Hora said, “All problems are psychological and all solutions are spiritual.”⁶ Working through all these layers seems to be a slow process indeed.

If we allow an organic continuity between our habitual ways and our becoming, we can enter any emotionally challenging experience and let it mold us, melt us, and ultimately transform us. The new person may only be subtly different than the one that began the process. Appreciating those subtleties then becomes the next step on the path and an essential step in the transformational process. If we miss the baby steps, then we may never take any giant leaps. By holding an awareness of our psychological work as an essential part of our spiritual paths, we potentiate both psychological and spiritual development. Without this awareness, psychological work can become unnaturally encapsulated in a small-minded, egotistical fixation on the self. Spiritual work can become unrealistically lofty and idealized.

EMOTIONAL WISDOM

Anxiety is excitement without the breath.

—ALEXANDER LOWEN

In some philosophies, emotions exist in a continuum, spanning the spectrum from confusion to wisdom. For example, fear is related to both courage and peace. Anger can transform into clarity and creativity. In Chinese medicine, each emotional essence is paired with an element. The earth element is negatively associated with the rejection of relationship, but its transformative features are centeredness, connection, and richness. The metal element is associated with rigidity and isola-

tion, which transform into inspiration and openness. The fire element's challenge is coldness and seriousness, while its positive quality is joy and laughter. By examining these pairs, we glimpse the possibility of emotional morasses transforming into wisdom.

Some approaches to Buddhism share this transformational view of emotion. Vajrayana Buddhism is literally translated as the "indestructible path." Indestructible because nothing need be discarded. Through practicing mindful presence continuously and fully, anger is transformed into mirrorlike wisdom. Ignorance transforms into nonconceptual wisdom. Poverty transforms into appreciation and equanimity. Clinging transforms into discernment. Competitiveness becomes skillful action. Again, we are mining the potential that is inherent in the challenge. By practicing presence fully and deeply, we become able to open so fully that transformation naturally occurs.

Take a moment and check in with yourself. Are there any emotions clearly arising in you right now? If so, pause and feel them in your body. If not, remember the last time you felt some strong emotions arise. See if, as you remember, you can feel the presence of the emotion in your body. Notice where in your body the emotion is present. What are the sensations of this emotion? Give yourself the time to just be with whatever you are feeling. Take an attitude of kindness and patience toward what you are feeling. Sit with the feeling in this atmosphere of patience and kindness. Let yourself breathe. Watch as the sensations shift within you. As you repeat this process, your ability to breathe and allow your whole being to shift and resolve will increase. The irony is that if we go in seeking transformation, the changes will not happen. If we enter with an open, accepting mind and heart, then we can ask ourselves, "What is the wisdom of this emotion?" This will enable us to move in that

direction. As we continue through this book, we will learn and discover for ourselves details that can expedite this process, but cultivating patience and kindness for ourselves is a bottom line.

As our emotions transform, not only do we feel better within ourselves, but our relationship to the world around us becomes clearer and more direct. We can better distinguish between our ideas and our actual experience. Out of this, we can better discern what we are actually perceiving, instead of being caught up in our mental constructs and projections. This is helpful in working with ourselves, but it is essential in relating to others. When we are not clear about our own experience, we often project the unconscious aspects of ourselves onto others. Working with our own emotions is the basis for working with others. Knowing what we are feeling in our hearts and bodies from moment to moment is the basis for working with emotions.

In our culture, which is so individualistic, disembodied, and disconnected from wild nature, those of us who want to access the wisdom of our emotions need to practice doing so. When emotions are overwhelming, the intention is to ground in the body without repressing the process. Emotions come in waves. Learn to let them wash over you without smashing you. The wash of emotions can let us sort out the clarity from the confusion, the love from the fear. And once again, we begin with the path and practice of the heart.

4

A PATH OF LOVE

The body is the ultimate witness to love.

—OCEAN VUONG, *ON BEING* INTERVIEW

IN THE PREVIOUS chapters, we explored the centrality of the heart to both physiology and emotion. With its powerful electromagnetic field, the heart sets the tone for our whole state of being. The heart entrances all of our cells into a particular mind state. In fact, physicists have shown that the strongest electromagnetic field entrains all the fields with which it interacts. What is more, cellular biology teaches us that the integral proteins in the cell membranes change their shape in response to the electromagnetic information in their field. The heart is the drummer to whose rhythm the cells dance.

What does the heart communicate to the cells? Many different kinds of messages. But when the heart is open and resting in its truest and deepest expression, we could call its message peace, awareness, life, presence, or love.



Resting in Open Heart

Take a moment and rest your whole body, your whole being. With each exhalation, drop deeper into a state of rest. Invite your mind to rest its thinking into awareness of breath and sensation. Scan through your body and let it relax into a comfortable position wherever you are. Let all muscles—internal and external, skeletal and visceral—relax, lengthen, and let go. Feel the sense that all of you is present.

From this place, check in with your heart. Feel any currents of emotion that are there. Acknowledge them; feel them; let them move, breathe; and, as much as possible, release them. Let them clear from your heart just as the clouds part and the mist burns away, so the sun can shine clear and bright in the sky.

Resting now with a clear and open heart, notice how the sensations in your chest feel. Are the sensations confined to the center of your chest where your heart resides? Do they seem to radiate out, like the heart's field? When our hearts are open fully, the boundaries of physicality soften, lighten, and even dissolve.

Let your open heart energy radiate out as far as it goes. Does it fill the room? Can it connect out to the sky? Beyond?

The open heart takes us beyond a feeling of small self into a sense of continuity with the world.

LEADING WITH HEART

I hope this practice allowed you to experience the expansiveness of the heart's energy. Doing so even in a quiet room and with guidance can be difficult, never mind as we go about our busy lives. The question remains—how do we integrate our hearts into our daily lives?

Practice heart meditation every day or as often as you are able. Do it right now, even for a moment. I know we just did it a moment ago, but that's the thing about practice—it's all about repetition. Rest as deeply as possible into your heartbeat (again, do it right now!) in your meditation and then see how long you can continue that awareness as you transition into activity. The more you rest into pulsation, the more quickly you can make the shift from a solid, ego-driven state to a fluid, universal state. If you practice often enough, it is possible to drop into the pulsation with a moment's intention.

Watch over time as your heart awareness pops up during life activities. The more frequently and deeply you practice, the more frequently your heart awareness will come to you spontaneously in the midst of your life.

Remember your heart whenever you are able. Remember your heart in moments of emotion.

When you are in a state of joy, it is a good time to feel the continuity between your heart, your whole body, and the space around you.

When you are in a state of sorrow, it might take some time to feel your heart under the heaviness in your chest. Take the time to excavate it. This is not about getting rid of the sadness or the heaviness, but looking for the essence of the heart amid the rubble of thoughts and emotions, to find the sensations and pulsations of the heart itself.

When you are in a state of anger, the push and activation of anger is so loud, it easily masks the subtlety of the heart itself, like looking for a quiet sage in the midst of a busy marketplace. Look, look again, and keep looking until you can find your heart and rest. What has happened to the anger then?

When you are frightened and cringing, or quiet and still, how can your heart soothe you and give you courage at the same time?

When you are frightened and frantic, and your heart is beating hard and fast, look for the wise, calm heart within the fear, perhaps at the center of it all. When you can find it and stay with it for a while, where is the fear?

Remember your heart in your interactions with others. Notice how quickly you shift from openheartedness to some kind of self-centered position. Imagine someone you know approaching, clearly wanting something from you. Imagine someone saying, "I am disappointed in our interaction." In each case, what happens to your heart, and what happens if you shift into an open heart?

ATTACHMENT AND OPENNESS

So much of our practice is noticing the fluctuation of attachment and openness in the sensations in our chests and hearts. Attachment often has a hallmark of tension, grasping, holding the energy in these areas; whereas openness is and feels open.

I am in the middle of a dilemma in my own heart. I am so attached to the beauty of our planet. As I write this, it is spring, and the new green of the leaves feeds me so deeply that I want to explode into blossom. The birds dance an invitation around me. The rain soothes me to the bone. I also feel so attached to all humans. It's not just that I love my friends and family, my

students and my community. I am deeply, deeply attached to the idea of the human species finding a way to live sustainably on the earth. I want the planet to continue to unfurl and evolve in a healthy, sustainable way. And I want humanity to be a part of that. If I hold these two attachments too tightly, too closely, with too little awareness, a conflict develops between them. It's so much to want and seems like such an incomprehensible stretch that we can get there. That conflict manifests in my heart as a tightening of fear and aggression. Without attention, I spin into an agitated, negative state. With time and repeated attention, I can let this resolve. The sensations of tension around my heart dissolve, and I can think in a more open, accepting way: what will be will be. I shift from attached clinging, pushing both sides of the conflict, to a feeling of love. I love this planet of ours. And I love us.

Feeling the natural fluctuations of our attachment and openness can give us a sense of patience with ourselves. We can give up the task of trying to be spiritually correct and be simply and humbly with what is.

PRACTICING LOVE

Emotional awareness of the heart generally requires quiet meditative time to develop, especially when one is fairly new to the practice. As emotional heart awareness develops, you can challenge yourself to renew that awareness in more varied and active situations. Remember your heart as you contemplate the world. As you form opinions, make decisions, read the news, decide how to vote—in all of these, feel your heart. What feels right in your heart? Get to know the quiet feelings of unrest that might signal a sense of disharmony with a situation or decision. This is not a clear, loud voice coming down