

CHOOSING EMBODIMENT

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Our bodies are spiritual allies. These words roll out easily, and yet just a few centuries ago they might have been considered wild heresy. Fortunately, in our 21st century, it is becoming increasingly obvious to more of us, including church elders and respected scientists, that body and spirit cannot be separated. For generations, our culture, our pedagogy, and our religious training have pointed us almost exclusively in the direction of our minds, our thinking, our spirits. Yet we, as Psychosynthesis spiritual seekers, *are* now also seeing the essential role our bodies play in our spiritual evolution. Given this important trend toward awareness and inclusion of our bodies in Psychosynthesis, I'd like to address the following queries in this essay: In just what ways are our bodies relevant to our spiritual development? And how do we, practically speaking, "choose embodiment" as a central part of our spiritual journey?

PART I – THE BODY’S SPIRITUAL GIFTS

I consider certain aspects of our bodies as "spiritual gifts." Recognizing and supporting these gifts helps us to experience our bodies as being profoundly relevant to spiritual growth, as well as dependable spiritual allies. These gifts are apparent in our bodies' abilities and capacities for

- Living in the moment.
- Being a doorway to transformation.
- Serving as a template for our sense of self.
- Providing emotional medicine.
- Holding an intention for our well-being.

Living in the moment

First and foremost, we see and sense that our bodies live in the present moment. Our bodies have no neurotic attachment to either the past or the future, to ideology, or to notions of how things should be. Our bodies live in the now. When we bring our full attention and awareness to our bodies in this present moment, we stand at a portal to a timeless, ultimately blissful state.

Being a doorway to transformation

Secondly, we notice that our bodies, by virtue of living in the present moment, hold the door open for us to experience transformation. They hold this door open at every moment of our

lives—patiently, forgivingly, ongoingly. Transformation doesn't happen tomorrow or yesterday. When it happens, it happens today, and today, and today. We gain an elegant access to this potential for transformation by bringing our awareness to our bodies.

Serving as a template for our sense of self

Descartes was in error. “I think; therefore I am” is now being replaced with “I feel; therefore I am.” Affective Neuroscience research currently concludes that our body's metabolic self-regulation, sensorimotor experience, and primary emotions (sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise and happiness) provide a foundation for the experience of consciousness and self. Leading neuroscientist Dr. Antonio Damasio describes our bodies' ongoing self-regulatory experience and ubiquitous emotional responsiveness as a “proto self,” the template from which consciousness and our feeling selves emerge.¹

In fact, the latest neurobiological research indicates our emotional response is hard wired to be our first responder to stimuli both external and internal. Emotions come before thoughts/consciousness. Not by much, only about .005 of a second, but emotions do come first.² This is important information because it is an antidote for people thinking they can control their emotions in the first instance. We can control what we do with emotions after they appear, but we cannot, for very good reasons of instinct and survival, control them before they appear.

Providing emotional medicine

Emotions, however, do more than provide us a foundation within which we can experience ourselves. In my clinical experience, I have found that embodied emotional release opens an inner medicine chest, providing endogenous, “body-made” experiences of well-being. Embodied emotional release means emotional release that is led by the body's experience rather than the mind's. When we allow the body to lead, there is *action*: tears, crying, sobbing, stomping, pounding. The focus is on what the body needs to do to express the emotion and come back to balance. When the mind leads the emotional release process, there is *story*: “I am a victim. My mom was neglectful. Nobody loves me.” There may be some emotional action, but the focus of awareness is on trying to understand and analyze the story of why there are bad feelings.

¹Dr. Antonio Damasio has written brilliantly about this new appreciation and evidence that body and emotion serve as a foundation for consciousness in his groundbreaking books: *Descartes Error, Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*: (N.Y. G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1994); *The Feeling of What Happens, Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (N.Y., Harcourt, Inc., 1999) *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (N.Y., Harcourt, Inc. 2003)

²Damasio, A., *The Feeling of What Happens, Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, (N.Y. Harcourt, Inc 1999) p. 127

I've watched the clock with clients for years to see how long it takes for embodied emotional expression to shift musculature, breathing, skin tone, heart rate, and mood. In my 35 years of clinical experience, I have observed that the body is finished with emotional release in about three action-packed minutes. Furthermore, after emotional release, the body naturally gravitates toward rest and relaxation . . . R&R . . . pleasure. Further, I've discovered that consciously bringing awareness to the body's relaxing, restorative experience for another few minutes (three minutes seems to be a minimum threshold here) shifts mood and internal states from pre-expression angst to post-release equanimity. This shift is what I call emotional medicine.

My clients' observably shifted body states of robust relaxation, and their subjective statements of well-being, reflect states of profound peace, self-confidence, and spiritual fulfillment. I assume as well that their biochemistry has similarly shifted, and that they are experiencing the body-made neuropeptides we associate with pleasure—endorphin, encephalon, and dopamine infusions, as well as serotonin balancing. Neuroscientists have recently discovered another class of endogenous pleasurable neuropeptides they call cannabinoids. Among those is one being researched called “anandamide,” named for the Sanskrit word for “internal bliss”³ because of the internal state it engenders. Our bodies, apparently, are designed to make bliss and well-being on their own. My clients regularly and reliably access these states of “internal bliss” once they learn to get out of their heads and let their bodies lead them.

Holding an intention for our well-being

Experiences of well-being and bliss are not just something we can *generate* through skillful emotional release, or through activities such as dance, yoga, meditation, hiking, healthy eating, art, or music. Dr. Damasio writes that our bodies continuously hold an intention for our well-being.⁴ This goes beyond a basic design to regulate our survival through homeostasis, to include something much more magnanimous and unconditional—an intention that we feel good, and be happy, healthy, connected, strong, resourceful . . . that we experience all the qualities associated with well-being as a baseline.

Could this natural intention for our well-being be a stand-in for spirit, God, and/or the benevolent force of being? The words intention, design, and well-being are words that refer to intangibles—like spirit, which is intangible. We know science can measure the *results* of intention, prayer, and experiences of well-being based on objective biochemical parameters such as blood pressure, cortisol levels, and so on, as well as through measuring differences in research subjects' self-reported subjective results. But science cannot measure this actual intention for well-being, just as science cannot measure faith in God. The intention and design for our well-being is something like an energy, a force . . . something we deduce by its results, something actually quite akin to spirit. Perhaps being aware of our bodies and attuning to our bodies as spiritual allies are just other ways of praying, other ways of meditating, of being present with Self, God, Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Great Mystery.

³Journal of Pharmacological and Biochemical Behavior, 1999 Oct: 64(2) P. 257-60 “Cannabis: Discrimination of “internal bliss”: JL Wiley.

⁴Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (New York, Harcourt, Inc. 2001)

Whatever the cause, be it a happy accident of impersonal evolution or a gift from spirit, when we begin to attune to our bodies' intention for well-being we find a dependable spiritual ally as well as a best friend for life. And in the way that beneficent spirit, Self, or God can be a subtle force ever present in our lives and yet require us to tune in to it, to focus on it, to call it in to our lives for it to be truly useful, so it is with our bodies' gifts. Present-moment possibilities, transformation opportunities, increased Self-awareness, emotional-bliss medicine, and unconditional intention for our well-being require us to be there—in our bodies. In other words, we have to *choose* embodiment.⁵

PART II – CHOOSING EMBODIMENT – HOW WE DO IT

Choosing Messy

Choosing embodiment means we choose messy. Choosing embodiment means we choose the messy blood, sweat, and tears of our actual human experience moment to moment. We choose to allow ourselves to be present for sensations and feelings that don't feel good as well as those that do feel good, sensations and feelings that have a mind of their own about when they appear, however inconveniently. Choosing messy requires courage and it requires an act of will, supported by the knowledge that descending into our flesh and blood is ultimately worth it for our human and spiritual evolution. This also means choosing surrender, in some ways, to sensations and feelings we cannot ultimately eradicate or control.

Choosing Our Transcendent/Immanent Self

Paradoxically, the act of *choosing* embodiment itself gives us a bit of a buffer from the full force of primal, identified incarnation. That buffer is our transcendent consciousness. When we *choose* incarnation, we bring our distinct, disidentified awareness to whatever embodied, identified experience we are having. We then have both our messy, immanent, compelling, thrilling, excruciating experience, as well as a place of transcendent awareness in which to rest while experiencing that often-wild ride of embodiment. Choosing embodiment is a moment-by-moment vehicle for the manifestation of the transcendent/immanent self.⁶ *We are transcendent in our choosing awareness, immanent in our surrendered embodiment.*

Learning the Body's Language—Sensation and Emotion

⁵I am grateful to Tom Yeomans for reminding us beautifully that embodiment is “the choice we make, as souls, through an act of will to incarnate, to enter the material world, and to dwell here fully” in his essay, “The Embodied Soul: Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Conversations in Psychosynthesis*, 2004, Association for the Advancement of Psychosynthesis.

⁶I am completely indebted to John Firman for his brilliant self-published monograph, *I and Self: Revisioning Psychosynthesis*, Palo Alto, 1991. John's clear explication of the non-dualistic reality of the transcendent/immanent self actually made it possible for me to continue to consider Psychosynthesis a major theoretical influence in my work, and a home base.

Once we've made our aligned choice and decided we're willing to regularly drop in to our bodies with our potential for disidentified awareness intact, what do we do then? How do we differentiate between being in our bodies, or "up in our heads"? How do we know when we are in our embodied experience, or in our thoughts or belief systems—in a reiteration of the past or an anticipation of the future? To know this, we have to learn the languages of embodiment—sensation and emotion.

Sensations

The language our bodies use to communicate with us is, first and foremost, the language of sensation. Sensations are body signals that enable us to gain a "sense" of some kind of physical presence or feeling in the body. Except for the analgesic numbing that the body offers us when we are gravely injured and need to take action to survive, sensations are a reliable route to the immediate, raw data of what is happening in this moment, in this body. Dr. Damasio describes the following body signals as the class of signals "most likely to represent the content of our feelings: signals related to pain states, body temperature, flush, itch, tickle, shudder, visceral and genital sensations, the state of the smooth musculature in blood vessels and other viscera."⁷ These metabolic sensations, or body signals, give us an interoceptive sense, an ability to track our body's interior. These sensations are hot or cold, warm or cool, numb or alive, painful or pleasurable, without equivocation. You may have sensations like bittersweet—oxymoronic pairing of opposites at the same time; but each *part* of that pairing of opposites is very clearly just one singular sensation.

While emotion is a close second, body sensation comes first and provides a foundation for emotions and all other body experiences. Neuroscience describes this sequence as a matter of development from the simple to the complex, in human evolution in general and in our brains in particular. First come simple stereotyped patterns of life regulation (as represented by body signals/sensations), then more complex patterns of emotional response, then our ability to feel our sensations and emotions and know we are feeling them, and finally our ability to think and reason.⁸

Emotions

It is important when talking about emotions to define our terms carefully. As mentioned earlier, cross-cultural research has revealed six universal, primary emotions: sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise and happiness. In this essay, when I use the word emotion, I am referring to these primary emotions only.

Emotions are action-oriented. Their first function is to produce specific actions designed to enhance our survival—from fighting, fleeing, or freezing, to bonding and pleasure seeking. Emotions are designed to do this on the spot, quickly, and exquisitely. The second function of emotions is to regulate our metabolism so we have the body resources, when needed, to punch,

⁷Damasio, A., *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* (New York, Harcourt, Inc. 2001) P. 106.

⁸Damasio, A., *The Feeling of What Happens, Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, (N.Y. Harcourt, Inc 1999) P. 55.

run, keep still, or enjoy ourselves.⁹ Emotions keep information and energy flowing through our organisms, again in amazingly brief cycles.

European somatic therapist and researcher Gerda Boyessen (founder of Biodynamic Therapy) discovered that the body has an elegant buildup-discharge-release cycle to handle emotional arousal: up, out, done. It is very efficient. When we cooperate with this embodied self-regulatory cycle, we discover just how efficient and singly focused our bodies are in their attempts to bring us back to states of well-being and bliss.

For example, when a client, Eve, arrives for a session and says she is feeling worthless, it is useful to help her discover what primary emotion is beneath that statement that leads her mind to thoughts of worthlessness. Acknowledging the “worthless” experience and then gently asking again, “what are you feeling,” often produces a litany of labels: I’m unlovable, I’m insecure, I’m depressed, but no emotion. When I offer Eve a menu—sad, mad, scared, glad—she can then, often instantly, drop into her body, feel her feelings and experience here-and-now relief.

There is a caveat here. We can only feel our emotions when we are embodied—alive to our bodies’ experience. When we are dealing with numbness or dissociation as a result of trauma, we first have to support our clients in feeling safe enough to drop into their bodies’ experience. To do this we have to make another important distinction.

Distinguishing Between Sensations and Emotions

The distinction between sensation and emotion is an essential one, particularly when we are healing or unwinding the effects of trauma in the body. For example is “sad” a sensation? Many of us might think so. However, strictly speaking, it is not. At its best, sad is shorthand for a group of sensations like these: my throat feels tight; I have a lump in my throat; my chest feels heavy; I have pressure in my heart; my eyes feel full of tears; my breath is choppy; I feel myself sobbing.

Sensations are the actual, simple body experiences *beneath all of our labels*, beneath all of our thoughts and stories about what is happening. The reason this sensation-emotion distinction is so important is that it is very easy to misidentify certain sensations for emotion, as when people mistake fatigue or hunger for sadness. Once we erroneously label a sensation as an emotion, our minds can come up with all kinds of reasons we must be sad. Then we’re off in a mind-generated loop of sadness and misery, when what our body was trying to tell us was that it was tired or needed a snack.

Similarly, people often mistake the sensations of excitement for sensations of fear. Someone will be describing a wonderful new step they are about to take, or a new person they’re beginning to date. Their faces are flush and alive with embodied excitement, their eyes are sparkling, and they seem joyous as they describe their news. When we ask what they are feeling, they say, “I’m scared.” Of course there may be a bit of fear there, but often the *predominant* embodied energy is excitement, mistaken for fear.

Imagine the joy we miss when we fail to perceive our own excitement, when our minds take off from an initial incorrect, “I’m scared,” to suddenly thinking of all that could go wrong. When we are attuned to what is happening in our bodies, the raw data of sensations, we have a far greater chance of moving through any experience with ease or authenticity. When we look into our bodies to see whether we are scared or excited, we will come up with the crucial

⁹Ibid, p. 53

differences between them. Although both include sensations of arousal, scared will contain cold, tight, contracted sensations, while excitement will contain warm, flowing, expanded sensations. Sensations give us an accurate sense of what is happening for us in the moment.

It is very important to remember here that what enables us to notice sensations and distinguish them from emotions or thoughts is our transcendent/immanent awareness, as mentioned above. Through this experiencing of self as both embodied and disidentified or distinct, we can come to a sense of spiritual alliance with and in our bodies.

Categories of Sensations

For the purposes of choosing embodiment, it is useful to separate sensations into three categories: sensations that feel good, sensations that don't feel good and sensations that don't necessarily feel good but are often a sign of healing. Becoming familiar with this latter group, sensations that don't feel good but truly represent healing, makes it easier to stay present in our bodies without being transported to our thoughts and belief systems at the first unfamiliar ache or twitch.

Sensations that Feel Good

Sensations that feel good are like these: warm, flowing, soft, gentle, pulsing, surging, muscle strength, vibrating, tingling, moist, wet, cool, dry, ease, quiet, still, peaceful, calm, clear, rhythmic, vital, firm, heat (as in healing hands), loose, smooth, electric, easy breathing, energetic, full, filled, satisfied, gurgling gut, hot (as in sexually aroused), expansion, and you can add your own favorites here: _____. These are the sensations that let us know all is well. When we focus on them, they have the potential to open us to profoundly altered states of joy, and a sense of original being, of "I am." Many of us have a tendency to miss, neglect or ignore what feels good in our bodies. Research has shown that we tend to remember our negative life experiences more easily and in greater numbers than our positive ones,¹⁰ resulting in a kind of trance of negativity.

In his seminal article "The Repression of the Sublime," Psychosynthesisist Frank Haronian described a similar problem with our suppressing or missing states of spiritual sublimity.¹¹ When we drop in to our bodies and look for sensations, *we need to remind ourselves continually to look for sensations that feel good.* We do this not as a veneer or a way of avoiding pain, but rather as an invitation to experience the good stuff. And highlighting pleasurable sensations is one way to begin experiencing our bodies as spiritual allies. We learn to surrender skillfully to the expanded states that the "feel good" sensations initiate, thereby strengthening our spiritual capacity for the physical experiences of sublimity, bliss, joy, and ecstasy.

Sensations that Don't Feel Good

Sensations that don't feel good are like these: cold, clammy, tight, sharp, digging, confining, rough, prickly, painful, pressure, low energy, flat energy, rapid breathing, can't catch breath, gasping, frozen, hungry, stuffed, overfull, tight gut, nausea, jumpy, jittery, bursting,

¹¹Haronian, Frank, "The Repression of the Sublime," Psychosynthesis Research Foundation, N.Y. 1967.

stagnant, hot (as in overheated), contraction, numbness, and you can add your own “favorites” here: _____. Much of normal body maintenance is uncomfortable. A fleeting ache or pain, a spasm or contraction often means simply “construction zone,” as nothing is static in the body. As we begin choosing embodiment by focusing on sensations, we soon discover they are fleeting, changing, ever moving. We can choose to take action, such as changing our position, getting a drink of water, or getting an x-ray, or simply stay present with these sensations from our transcendent/immanent self. In the case of sensations signaling serious problems in our bodies, we are more likely to be aware of the need for medical attention, and take appropriate action, when we experience these sensations from a centered place in ourselves.

Sensations that Don’t Necessarily Feel Good but Often Signal Healing

Sensations that don’t necessarily feel good but often signal healing are trembling, shaking, itching, burning, vibrating, tingling, burping, stomach gurgling and emptiness, and add your own here: _____. The healthy, living body is always in some state of restoration, and these are sensations that serve as harbingers of healing.

Trembling or mild shaking often signal that the body is discharging or releasing trauma. People often misinterpret this as feeling scared, and then think through a list of potential catastrophes, which intensifies the sensations—until they really do become scared. Alternatively, one can stay present and relax into trembling while considering the possibility that the body is trying to restore well-being.

Itching is often a body signal that a wound is healing, that something new is happening. The new skin is stretching, filling in the gaps, and we experience it as itching. Itching is often a spiritual signal for a new insight, or a new perspective. Burning sensations also sometimes indicate that a purification process is going on in the body or being. As in many native or indigenous traditions where herbs are burned or smoke is created for cleansing, so it can be with us. We can consider a burning sensation as a signal that something within us is being purified, sanctified.

Gut gurgling and burping are also vastly misinterpreted, and unappreciated. Gurgling viscera are a sign that the energy is flowing in the gut—the seat of an enormous number of essential neuropeptide receptors that influence our well-being. In fact, researchers have discovered that we actually have a “second brain” in our guts.¹²

This “belly brain” continually sends us useful survival information via our “gut instincts.” When our stomachs are tight or in a knot, we cannot receive the benefit of these instincts. Like a moving stream compared with a stagnant swamp, when guts are gurgling, all is well. Even nausea, a result of intense gut movement, can signal deep and profound movement for spirit as well as body.

Pioneering neuroscientist Dr. Candace Pert, popularizer of the term “bodymind,” has been dismayed that her seminal research about the neuropeptide receptors, which she considers “molecules of emotion,” led to the development and overuse of antidepressants. Many antidepressants have hugely deleterious effects on the guts, and impede the healthy flow of those

¹² Sandra Blakeslee, “Complex and Hidden Brain in Gut Makes Stomachaches and Butterflies,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1996.

Gershon, M., *The Second Brain*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1998.

very “molecules of emotion.”¹³ Unfortunately, most of us apologize when we burp or hear our guts gurgle. These are the sounds of a healthy body, and, in hearing them, we can take pleasure in the notion that all is well.

Emptiness is another often misinterpreted experience. Our *minds* often automatically associate such an experience with loneliness, lack of fulfillment, misery. The reality is often quite the opposite. When we get out of our heads and drop down into the actual embodied experience of whatever sensations we’re calling emptiness, there is frequently a joy to behold.

For example, a client I’ll call Zoe was well able to be present in her body with uncomfortable sensations, without looping up into catastrophic or retraumatizing thoughts. After experiencing the grief of a relationship breakup, she reached a point in a session where she said “I feel empty.” Although I was inwardly delighted, I contained my excitement so Zoe could make her own discovery. I gently encouraged her to stay present with her embodied experience of this emptiness, supporting her surrendering into this emptiness. I invited her to feel what the emptiness actually felt like, right now. There was silence. Soon Zoe said that the emptiness felt “er . . . ah . . . er . . . full. Full!” And then we both laughed out loud.

What a delicious paradox. “Full” is so often what emptiness feels like when we experience it in the body. Other clients have reported a “peaceful feeling,” “stillness,” or “quiet.” When the sensation of emptiness appears in our embodied experience, we can rejoice, for we are almost home to equanimity, peace, and sometimes, if we can stay with it, bliss. The pivotal word here is embodied. In order to move through emptiness to well-being, we have to be in our bodies, consciously able to tolerate those sensations, both pleasant and unpleasant.

Barriers to Embodiment – Numbness and Retraumatization

Embodiment is not immediately possible for people when they are experiencing sensations of numbness. Numbness is a sensation that often indicates that we are in the territory of unresolved trauma. By itself, numbness is a benign sensation, a gift our organisms give us so that we don’t have to experience being eaten by a tiger or impaled on a sword. Numbness is the sensation associated with the “freeze” mechanism of our instinctual survival strategy of fight, flight, and freeze. We freeze when we play dead to fool a predator into passing us by. Although we appear completely motionless or “frozen,” our sympathetic nervous system is pumping a mile a minute. If the tiger stopped and looked into our bulging, pulsing eyes, he would see that, beneath our motionless exterior, our heart was alive and beating furiously.

In the wild, this “freeze” mechanism works quite well. If we survive a life-threatening attack by freezing, or playing dead, our nervous systems have a simple and efficient plan for thawing out this frozen, numb energy. We are programmed to first look around and ascertain that we are no longer in danger. Then we begin an orderly, predictable pattern of trembling and shaking to discharge the pent-up sympathetic nervous system charge. Finally, we complete the defensive gesture that the “freezing” prohibited. This might be running away, or swinging and kicking our arms and legs out at the now long gone predator.¹⁴

¹³Pert, C. *Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Feel*, New York, Touchstone, 1997

¹⁴This business of ‘completing the defensive gesture’ is often done by the body in micro-movements. The leg muscles will twitch as if the person is running. The shoulders will almost

In our post-modern world, this “freeze” mechanism brings us a world of trouble. Not only does it make choosing embodiment difficult, it makes us prone to anxiety disorders. Frozen or numb sensations require special care. Before we can choose embodiment, we must be able to actually feel our bodies. Dr. Peter Levine has been a pioneer in brilliantly teaching us how to unwind the neurobiology of trauma and to thaw out frozen sensations.¹⁵ Healing trauma usually involves a process of titration, a slow and simple method of moving back and forth between the sensations of numbness and sensations of aliveness.

Unfortunately, many earlier emotional-release-based therapies did not understand the neurobiology of unwinding trauma in the body, as this has been a recent breakthrough. Therapists who would encourage people to emote or discharge without attending to frozen energy would unwittingly lay down another level of trauma for a compliant but now reinvaded client. The client is retraumatized because, when a person is numb or dissociated, they do not have emotional resources or resources of will to call upon, in order to resist the therapist’s guidance toward emotion. They are frozen and defenseless. They try to comply, and in this act of unresourceful, unconscious, unwilling compliance, they are again the victims of perpetration. Another layer of numbness is applied over the first.

As Psychosynthesis practice has traditionally tended toward transcendence rather than embodiment, this problem has not been our legacy. However, ignoring the frozen, numb states that trauma produces in the body, and prematurely emphasizing transcendence to spirit can also be damaging to real healing and authentic embodiment.

Thawing Out – Coming Back to Our Bodies

It is essential for those of us who want to choose embodiment to recognize that when we encounter frozen energy or numbness in ourselves or in our clients, we have to slow down. We need to do something to stop the numbing, to be here now with the frozen energy and engender a gentle return to embodied resourcefulness. One method I’ve developed for coming back to our bodies is to first become very precise in our experience of whatever numbness or frozen energy is present. Using the VIVO¹ method, we notice how much of the body feels frozen or numb. We get very interested in how deep, how wide, is the numbness. It is crucial to stay out of our thoughts and stories about what caused the numbness, and just stay present with the embodied experience.

Sometimes a focus on the numb state increases anxiety, in which case we slow down even more. It may help to shift awareness explicitly to states in the body that feel good and focus on them until there is a thawing. In cases of great anxiety, it may be necessary to return to traditional methods of distraction; for example, visualizing a safe place, or making

imperceptibly rise as if to turn away from the predatory, while the other hand will subtly move as if to strike out.

¹⁵ Levine, P. *Waking the Tiger*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA 1997

¹VIVO is Spanish for "I live." It is a protocol I originated, and is the basis for a CD currently being researched and marketed. Information is available through my website, www.penelopetalk.com.

nonthreatening contact, such as hand holding, foot touching, or offering a shoulder. Whatever the method, we do not proceed until there are enough embodied resources—such as a sense of strength, power, or calm—for us to tolerate uncomfortable sensations without triggering fearful thoughts.

The next step in coming back to embodiment after being present with the numbness is to find sensations in the body that feel good, even in a finger, a toe, or an ear lobe. Hands and feet are good places to find pleasurable sensations almost any time. Here it is important to insure that we are warm enough, as being physically cold can trigger shaking which can trigger thoughts of fear, triggering more numbness.

Finally, as we build our capacity for experiencing pleasant sensations, we gently move back and forth between the sensations of numbness and the sensations that feel good. Slowly we will discover that the numbness is shifting. We continually look for and *seek* the signs of healing. This might be trembling, shaking, or burping. We look for and welcome the gentle spreading of warmth, lightness, ease, or any sensations that feel good and signal healing.

It is important to remember that healing usually begins with subtlety. Our breathing softens. Our muscles relax. We notice that gradually we *are* coming back into our bodies. Interestingly, our hands often signal healing well before the contents of consciousness have caught up with our bodies. It is fascinating to see hands moving unconsciously into self-soothing, reassuring, holding or stroking gestures. Sometimes our hands, without a hint of premeditation, form beautiful sacred mudras—hand positions of prayer, supplication, of Buddha or Christ consciousness. What a joy it is to behold these sacred hand gestures in ourselves or others, messages across thousands of years that all is well.

IN CONCLUSION

Choosing embodiment invites us to develop fluency with our bodies' experiences and communications. We are "there" for our bodies, in good times and bad. We look and listen to our bodies and learn to distinguish between our thoughts, emotions and sensations. We learn to ride the waves of our emotions as brief, fleeting cycles of buildup, discharge, release, and well-being. We surrender to the basic ground of our bodies' being—simple, physical sensations, and the ever-changing flow of energy and healing intention they represent. We surrender to pain as well as to pleasure. We surrender to the present moment in our bodies, to our body wisdom, and to a body intention for our well-being. We are fully immanent and immersed in, not separate from, our experience. At the same time we are completely distinct, aligned with transcendent awareness that skillfully tracks our immanent experience. We are transcendent and immanent in the same moment.

Choosing embodiment requires an evolution of our consciousness, a strengthening of our will, and an opening of our hearts. Can we love ourselves as our bodies do? Can we be as efficient and clear about moving through pain and getting back to pleasure as our bodies are? Can we be as patient, and unconditionally forgiving as our bodies are to us? Can we live as fully in this moment, now, as our bodies do? This is our work. As we just begin to do these things, we find there is a force or intention within our bodies ready to shower us with well-being and bliss. We find that our bodies, as we choose them, are our best friends for life and our spiritual allies, unparalleled guides for realization.

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