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Head, 1954

ARTWORK BY PAVEL TCHELITCHEV

Awakening in the Body

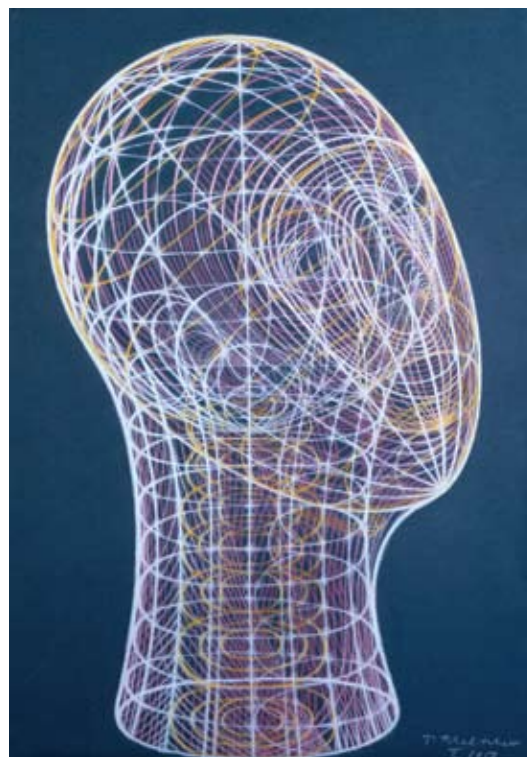
Being mindful of the body is a profound, though often overlooked, opportunity to deepen our meditation and develop our insight, says PHILLIP MOFFITT.

Meditating on the body, we discover all four of the Buddha's noble truths.

MANY MEDITATION STUDENTS view body awareness as just a starting point for their practice. They tend to skip over it in order to focus on their mind states and emotions, believing that's where they will experience the deepest insights. But the truth is, your body is the ideal mirror for discovering the Buddha's great truths of suffering (*dukkha*), change (*anicca*), and "not self" (*anatta*).

In the *Anguttara Nikaya* (sutta I, 21) the Buddha states, "There is one thing, monks, that, cultivated and regularly practiced leads to a deep sense of urgency...to the supreme peace...to mindfulness and clear comprehension...to the attainment of right vision and knowledge...to happiness here and now...to realizing deliverance by wisdom and the fruition of Holiness: It is mindfulness of the body."

Despite the Buddha's recommendation, practicing mindfulness of the body is often overlooked as an opportunity for awakening, even when the body is demanding attention. For instance, recently a student informed me at the beginning of a ten-day vipassana meditation retreat I was leading



Wire Head from Side, 1951

that she would not be able to sit still through any of the meditation sessions because she had fibromyalgia. During past retreats her pain had become so intense after fifteen minutes of sitting that she either had to lie down on the floor or leave the hall. I assured her that we would work with her limitations and expressed sympathy for her pain. Then I asked for more details. Listening to her story, it became clear that this well-meaning yogi was conflating two separate experiences, and it was making her miserable. Yes, she had genuine physical discomfort, and at times her body hurt a lot. But she had also developed a reactive mind state to her difficulty. She anticipated that her body was going to hurt even before discomfort arose, and she reacted by becoming stressed and anxious. So even if the pain was minor, she contracted into it. Her mental experience of pain far outweighed the physical experience. And on those occasions when really strong physical pain arose, she fell into

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negative speculation about how long it would last and how difficult it would be. By conflating her physical experience and her mental reaction, over the course of three years the pain became her identity—she took birth as a “fibromyalgia person.”

The Buddha taught that being mindful of the sensations that arise in your body without clinging to them is essential to spiritual practice. In the *Majjhima Nikaya* (sutta 36), the Buddha says, “If the body is not mastered [by meditation], the mind cannot be mastered. If the body is mastered, mind is mastered.”

I encouraged the student with fibromyalgia to take a fresh approach to her meditation practice and suggested that a new relationship to her body was possible. During the retreat I taught her some of the many ways she could make her experience in her body the primary object of her meditation. To her credit, she was willing to give this new body orientation a chance, despite her disbelief and anxiety. At the end of the retreat, she reported that, for the first time, she had sat through every session. To her amazement, she had had only mild physical discomfort, and she felt as though she was finally starting to understand why vipassana practice is called “insight” meditation. She wondered why this retreat had been so different from the others and whether her body would behave so well when she returned to her daily life. “You have begun to use your body as your teacher,” I told her, “and if you make mindfulness an ongoing practice at work and in your home life, it will continue to serve you. But body awareness is not an aspirin you take for pain relief. It is a practice that frees your mind from suffering, regardless of conditions.”

Cultivating a Felt Sense of the Body

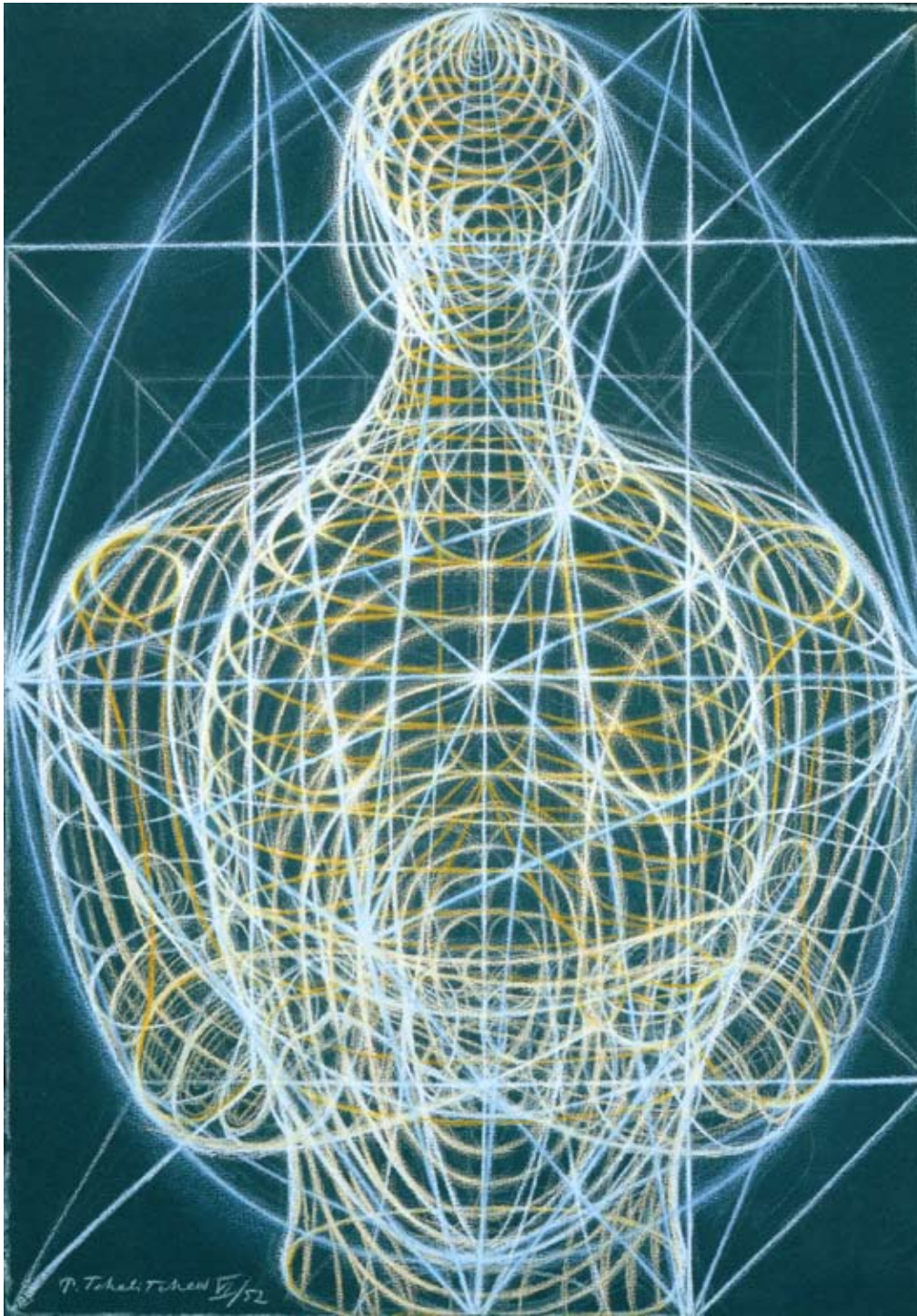
Inspired by the Buddha's words and by my own experience, I have made awareness of the body a focal point of my teaching. For the last six years I have been part of a team of Spirit Rock teachers that offers an annual retreat called “Awakening in the Body,” in which all the dharma teachings are body-centric or First Foundation based. At these retreats we teach two movement classes each day, in addition to walking meditation. In the weekly meditation group I lead, I incorporate movement between sittings. And during most retreats I teach, I include “mindful movement yoga” or have a guest instructor teach yoga or chi gong. These years of emphasizing body awareness in meditation have shown me that it is an effective practice for many Western students, who are all too often engaged in

conceptualization. You are embodied consciousness. It greatly limits your developing wisdom if you fail to include the body in your meditation.

In practicing mindfulness of the body, it is your direct experience or felt sense that is important, not your judgments about your body, your wishes for what it might be, or even your stories about how your body came to be as it is. The Buddha called this felt sense “awareness of the body in the body,” meaning that your attention has dropped into the actual physical experience rather than your views and concepts about the body.

You can experience this felt sense or dropped attention through the following exercise: Hold your right hand up and begin by looking at the back of it. What do you see? You might notice the skin color, the veins, and whether there are any wrinkles or scars. Now turn it over and look at your palm. You might notice its shape or the length of your fingers. Alternate between looking at the front and the back of your hand. You might observe the length of the various finger bones in relation to each other or the size of your knuckles. You might notice the pattern the lines make in the palm of the hand. Just witness these things. That's a kind of mindfulness, right? However, because you are a removed observer, it is not the same as the felt experience. You are not directly experiencing the essence of “hand.”

Now rest your hand for a moment. (I'm going to ask you to close your eyes, so you'll need to read ahead, and then do the exercise.) With your eyes closed, raise your hand again. Start to move your hand in space. Let the wrist move with the hand. You might curl the fingers in toward your palm, then extend them

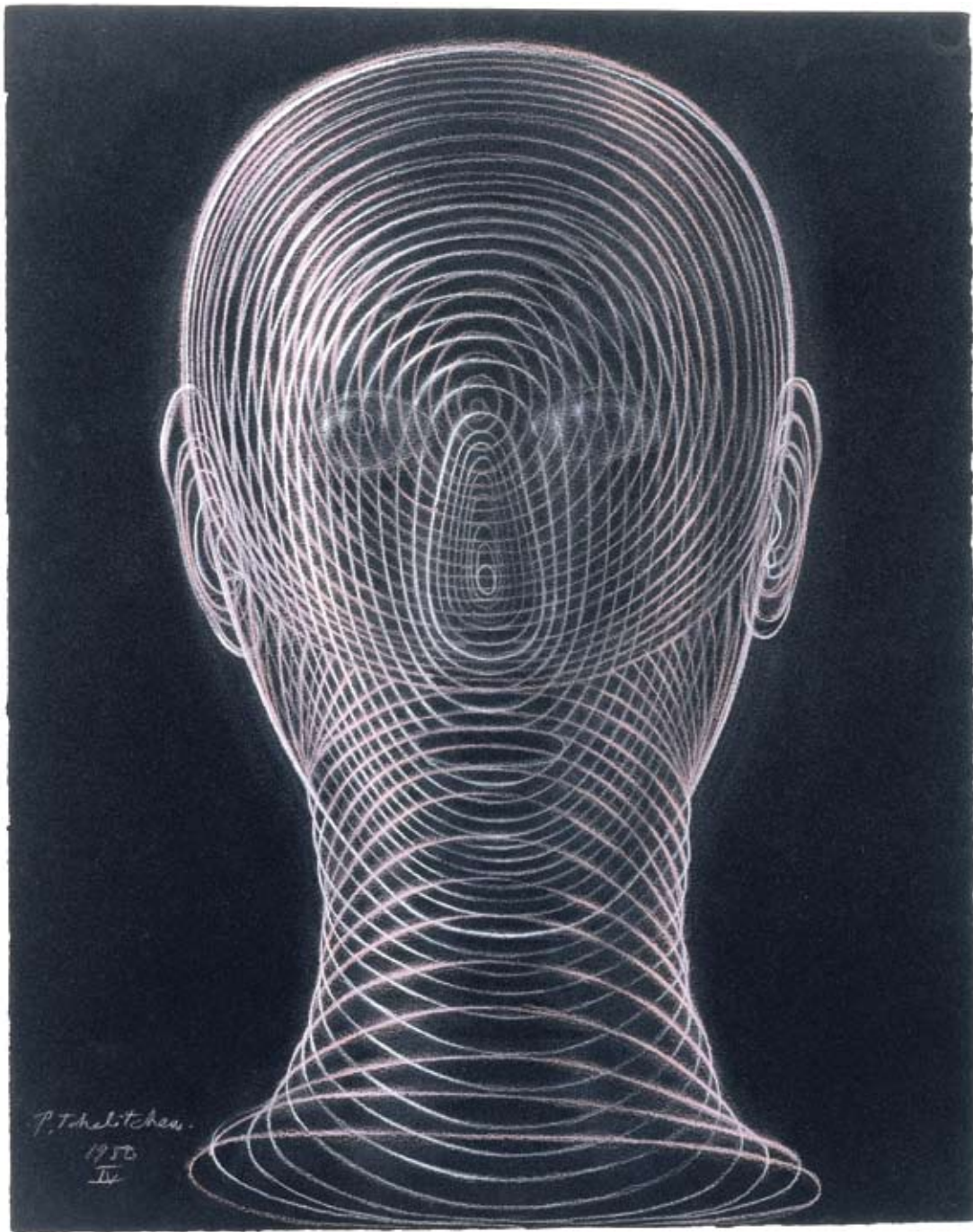


Torse (Torso), 1952

out a little. With your attention, “feel” the thumb, the forefinger, the middle finger, the ring finger, the little finger, the palm, and the back of the hand. Lower your hand and open your eyes. This is a very different experience than looking at the hand, is it not? This is the felt sense of the body; it is nonconceptual and lies within the experience itself.

My student with fibromyalgia had some access to this felt sense, but she was so imprisoned by her habitual reactions to what she felt that she could not let her body sensations just be; instead, she

tried to avoid, resist, or overcome them. As we worked together during the retreat, she learned to develop what’s called “relaxed attention” as a means of softening into awareness of her physical sensations, regardless of whether they were pleasant or unpleasant. By learning this skill she began to find ease with her physical pain. While her discomfort was real and at times difficult, it was just the sensation of pain in the body. Her suffering, for the most part, was the result of her mind contracting and clinging as it collapsed into reactivity.



Head IV, 1950

The same phenomenon happens around emotional suffering. It too registers in the body. Then the mind contracts and clings, causing the emotional suffering to grow exponentially. But you can use the very same relaxed attention and softening into awareness of your emotions to gain freedom from suffering. For example, the next time you're feeling hurt and angry because you think your significant other doesn't hear or appreciate you, rather than succumbing to these hindrances of mind, stay with them as body experiences. You may sense tightness in the belly and around the eyes from the hurt and some heat from the anger. Meet these body experiences with mindfulness

and compassion by saying to yourself, "Hurt and anger feel like this." This is softening into your emotions. You do not judge your feelings, nor do you try to get rid of the hurt or the anger; you simply stay with the sensations, and they will self-liberate in their own time.

Developing Relaxed Attention

To feel the difference between relaxed attention with softening into awareness versus reactivity and clinging, continue with the exercise. Place your right forearm in the palm of your left hand

and just feel that for a moment. Now, pretend that you don't trust your left hand. Keep the right forearm touching the left palm but hold a little tension in the back of the right hand and the forearm, such that they're slightly hovering above the left hand. There's contact, but you don't trust the contact to support you. Now let that tension go, and drop your right forearm into the palm of the left hand. Push down as though you can't trust the hand not to throw your arm away, so you're going to hold it there. Now just relax and let the forearm rest in the left palm.

This feeling of resting the forearm—neither hovering nor pushing down—is like relaxed attention. Can you feel the difference? You may be responding to strong desires and difficult situations in your daily life by pulling away from (hovering) or leaning into (pushing) the moment. Neither of those reactions helps you meet life with ease. The cultivation of relaxed attention, however, will prevent you from falling into reactivity.

Through practicing mindfulness of the body and relaxed attention, you learn to be with whatever sensation is arising in the body, regardless of whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, without trying to hold on to or push away the experience. Such is the freedom taught by the Buddha. Having mastered the body, you are then able to turn your attention to your mind states, all of which register in the body, and gradually learn to become nonreactive to each of them. As a result, your mind becomes spacious, alert, curious, and equanimous, and you are able to proceed to the more subtle levels of meditation practice, which require that your mind not be hindered by difficult states.

But as is always true in meditation practice, you have to start where you are, and most likely that is with a fairly undeveloped relationship to your body. So in addition to simply cultivating increasing body awareness, you can also reflect on the nature of the body as a storehouse of your past experience, as a means of staying present in the moment and as a gateway to liberation.

The Body as a Storehouse

As you begin to practice mindfulness of the body, you discover that it is the storehouse of all the physical and emotional events of your life to this point, starting with your genetic inheritance. Through reflection you gain the insight that these conditions, while unique to you, are actually impersonal, like conditions in nature, and that clinging to them with anger, resentment, or self-pity only adds to your suffering. Your liberation lies not in what the body has stored from the past but in how you respond to whatever manifests in your body in any given moment. This is the insight of karma—that what is happening in this moment is dependent on past seeds of action that are now blossoming due to the right causes and conditions. Your freedom, now and in the future, will be determined by how you respond to these impersonal conditions. Are your actions wholesome or not? This is awakening in the body.

In this very body, in this very moment,
you can choose not to succumb to reactions
to the arising of pleasant and unpleasant.

For example, you may have inherited favorably proportioned leg bones that make it possible for you to sit cross-legged in meditation without any discomfort, or perhaps you inherited disproportionate leg bones that make it difficult for you to sit for long periods, even in a chair. In either case, you learn to sit in meditation with your body just the way it is, feeling neither superior nor inferior. These are simply conditions, and your practice is to respond to these conditions from your deepest values.

Similarly, you might have inherited a gene that increases your chances of developing cancer, or maybe you are haunted by an injury or an act of abuse in your childhood. Rather than being angry that those conditions are unfair, you make your life worthwhile just as it is. Again, what's given is not your business; it's how you respond that determines your happiness and well-being. Of course, you work to improve those difficult conditions that can be affected, but you stop resisting their existence and feeling victimized, inferior, or resentful.

Various memories from the storehouse of the body will inevitably arise during meditation. Many of them are unpleasant, and you may have a tendency to get caught up in your emotions about them. If they are pleasant, your mind may be drawn into fantasy or planning and lose awareness. But if you stay in the body regardless of what arises from its storehouse, then you not only maintain awareness, but you also actually start to affect your experience. For example, when a difficult memory from the past shows up, instead of pushing it away, simply notice how it feels in your body in this moment. If it's a longing for something you missed or once had but is now lost, rather than clinging to it as a desire, focus on it as a body experience in this very moment. You will discover that being mindful of all that arises as sensation from the storehouse of your body purifies the charge that the memory possesses. This purification happens spontaneously, without any doing on your part. Sometimes it takes the form of releases—the body will make spontaneous movements or you will feel vibrations, heat, or pressure release within. Sometimes you will notice the release in the moment it is occurring; other times you may not notice it until days or months later. A number of students have told me that the best bodywork they ever experienced happened during sitting meditation. When you let loose experience that was defining and limiting you, it's like having a great psychotherapy session without having to pay for it.

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By bringing relaxed attention to your experience, you facilitate this process of purification and release. Like the exercise in which you rested your right forearm in your left hand without pushing or hovering, you can bring relaxed attention to the storehouse of the past as it unfolds in the present.

Coming into the Present through the Body

You can learn to utilize mindfulness of the body as a way of training yourself to stay present in this very moment. It's quite a feat to stay mindfully present in your body despite the pressures and responsibilities in your life, not to mention all your anxieties and uncertainties. Most people are mindful of their own embodied presence for only brief moments, usually around specific functions; more often than not, they are lost in the past or the future or in escaping altogether through disassociation or distraction. But if you are not mindfully present, you are missing the unfolding of your precious human life and you are forsaking any chance to consciously participate in how it unfolds.

Developing and maintaining a constant awareness of the body is by far the most effective way to learn to stay present in the moment. Try coming into the present through the body the next time you are sitting in a meeting at work, feeling restless or anxious. First, drop your attention to your pelvis resting in the chair and feel whatever sensations arise. Then, notice one specific sensation in your hands and feel the movement of a single breath. Finally, observe what happens to your mind. When you focus your attention on specific body sensations, it frees you from the story in your mind that's causing you to be reactive, and it allows the possibility of softening into the moment just as it is. You may have to do mindfulness exercises like this a few times, but the feeling of embodied presence will arise, and eventually you will discover a sense of well-being.

One caution: it takes time to develop

mindfulness of the body, which is why it is called a practice. My advice is to not go looking for results, but rather to commit yourself to being present in your body as a way of meeting life that reflects your deepest values. When you are willing to feel your own embodied presence no matter what conditions are arising, you have taken a major step toward your own liberation.

The Body as a Gateway to Realizing Dharma

Having discovered this profound level of access to your own embodied presence, you begin to use the body as a gateway to realizing the liberating insights of the other three foundations of mindfulness that the Buddha identified: mindfulness of feeling, mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of dhammas. You begin to notice in your body how each moment of your experience is conditioned by pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings—the Second Foundation of Mindfulness—and you observe that when you have no mindfulness, what your mind says and does is largely determined by these feelings. Then you turn your attention to the state of the mind itself—the Third Foundation of Mindfulness. It is often easier to identify the state of your mind by noting your body sensations rather than your emotions. Emotions are so charged and so engrossing that perception of them becomes fuzzy, whereas the body tends to clearly manifest what's happening. Finally, you can begin to look at the universal characteristics that the Buddha identified as they are manifesting in the body—the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. You begin to see how the mind is hindered by desire, aversion, restlessness and worry, sloth and torpor, and doubt. You also notice the mental factors that lead to enlightenment, such as strong energy and equanimity.

You probably have a felt sense of the Four Noble Truths, which are at the core of and encompass the Buddha's teachings. The Four Noble Truths are: suffering—also described as stress, unease, or dissatisfaction—inevitably arises when the

mind is untrained; the cause of this suffering is the mind's tendency to cling to its preferences; cessation of this clinging and, therefore, the cessation of suffering is possible; and there is a way, which the Buddha called the Eightfold Path, to find this liberation.

Through mindfulness of the body, you begin to see why the Buddha began with the First Noble Truth, *dukkha*, the stress and anxiety interwoven in all life. You can also experience in your body the Second Noble Truth, since you cling to getting and keeping what is pleasant to the body and removing or avoiding what is unpleasant to it. Through the body you can also discover the liberating insight of the Third Noble Truth: you have choice. In this very body, in this very moment, you can choose not to succumb to reactions to the arising of pleasant and unpleasant. You don't have to move, for example, because at this moment your leg is hurting. It's just your leg hurting. Nor do you have to react to something hurtful someone has said at work. Yes, it was unpleasant, but it was just unpleasant. Suffering arises from your unwillingness to be with this moment just as it is. It causes you to distort what's true in life because you are demanding that the moment be shaped to the way you want it.

When you choose to be present with your body when it is in pain or when it is feeling the tension and contraction caused by your wanting mind, you are accepting your life experience just as it is, in this moment, without clinging. This feeling of nonattachment and nonreactivity is similar to how it feels when you do the exercise of letting your forearm rest in your palm without pushing or hovering. It is a way of meeting life in which you don't add anything unnecessary to the experience. You don't identify and contract into it. Like the yogi whose body pain ceased to be an issue, your life gains ease. Each time you have such a moment, no matter how brief, you have a little taste of all the future moments in which you can have such ease. You are aware of your body as a gateway to liberation. ♦