

THE SUBTLE BODY

The human body is, in its
deepest essence, a dharma body.
It is a concrete revelation of the
dharma.

Sato Tsuji

We live in a world dominated by the disconnected conceptual mind, which is cut off from the body, heart, spirit, soul, earth and natural world. The conceptual mind is a useful tool, but when it is not in service to higher wisdom, it turns into a juggernaut running amok. This dominance of the disconnected mental sphere throws our inner ecology out of balance, which is the root of all of humanity's largest problems—from destruction of the natural world to loss of community, deteriorating education, devitalized food, proliferating health problems such as depression or cancer, meaningless work, militarism and endless wars, intractable poverty, addiction to technological gadgetry, and corporate control of politics and the flow of information. If the human race is to develop a more wholesome and balanced way of life, we need to cultivate a new inner ecology, where the mental faculty is deeply connected with the felt experience and living wisdom of the body.

LIVED BODY, SUBTLE BODY, WISDOM BODY

Spending most of our lives “upstairs” in the mental realm, most of us barely inhabit our bodies. To the extent we do relate to

our bodies, it is mainly to the outer physical body, as an object to be groomed or manipulated. When we look in the mirror, we see the body as an object. But the body experienced from within is entirely different. The body's living wisdom is not found so much in the realm of flesh, blood, and bones. It is found by going deeper— into the lived body experienced from within, as a field of living presence that is intrinsically open and responsive to what is. In the esoteric systems of East and West, this is known as the *subtle body*.

Even though our experience of life is largely mental and disconnected, pure being and pure relatedness are always available to us. We need only let go of our addictive mental fixations and enter the body lived from within. This is not the body of flesh and blood and bones, but rather the body as a field of presence that is naturally open and awake in its very nature.

The difference between the outer body and the inner, subtle body is akin to the difference between the musical score of a Beethoven symphony and the dynamic felt experience of hearing that symphony played by an orchestra. Similarly, our most intimate experience of the body is its felt energetic presence, pervaded by awareness. The subtle body is, in essence, a *wisdom body*, a dharma body, because it is a doorway to direct perception, to the immediacy of life, to open presence, unmediated by the conceptual mind. *Wisdom* here signifies “direct knowing.” Direct knowing is not mental cognition. It is immediate felt knowing, unmediated by thought or concept.

This wisdom body is a field of inter-relational presence, always in dynamic relatedness with the life within and around us. While the conceptual mind can focus on only one thing at a time, this subtle,

inner body can feel, sense, and hold whole networks of information all at once. As William James once described this implicit knowing of the lived body:

In the pulse of inner life immediately present now in each of us is a little past, a little future, a little awareness of our own body, of each other's persons, of these sublimities we are trying to talk about, of the earth's geography and the direction of history, of truth and error, of good and bad, and of who knows how much more?

Thus the lived body's way of knowing is holistic and intuitive. We can, for example, immediately experience a felt knowing that a situation is not quite right, without knowing exactly how we know this.

Our mental faculty can only provide an intellectual understanding of truth. But the word *understand* implies going beneath conceptual knowledge to something deeper. So to truly understand, we need to go down—below the mind. To know in our belly, to know in our heart, is very different from knowing something with our mental faculty. It involves letting go of conceptual thinking and tuning into subtle body felt knowing.

Many strains of philosophy and religion, both East and West, have dismissed or condemned the body as something lower, corrupt, or sinful, a prison or place of torment, “the devil's playground.” In the West there is also the unfortunate view of the body as a machine— inert, dumb matter functioning according to scientific laws. From this viewpoint, intelligence is located only in the mental realm. But the esoteric spiritual traditions of East and West hold a different perspective, recognizing the subtle body as a field of living intelligence and awareness. In the Tantric traditions, it is said that the body is what makes awakening possible. As the vehicle for the fresh

immediacy of awakened perception, the human body is extremely precious.

SENSATION BODY, FEELING BODY, AWARENESS BODY

We can distinguish three main fields of direct wisdom-body knowing: sensing (or sensation), feeling, and pure awareness. The body as a field of sensing is what we could call the *sensation body*. And the “capitol” of the sensation body is the lower belly center below the navel, where we can have a “gut sense” of things. Sensation is the primal pulsation of being alive that arises out of being in direct contact with the sense fields of seeing, hearing, and kinesthetic touch.

This kind of immediate sensory knowing is connected with the earth principle. When we are grounded and settled in the belly center, our perception is very simple and ordinary—almost blunt. *Here I am, present in this body. Things are as they are.* There is no need for commentary, pigeon-holing, or reactivity. And we experience a direct bodily sense of stillness and equanimity based on connecting with the earth.

A second dimension of the wisdom body is *the feeling body*—the body as a field of felt knowing, or knowing through feeling. The essence of feeling is flow, like the current of a deep stream. This deep sense of flow is more subtle than the vital pulsing of sensation, which is more like ripples on the surface of the stream.

Feeling is an expression of our basic responsiveness and sensitivity to life. It is through feeling that we experience our relatedness to the world and how we are affected by it. It is a form of communion with life. In the words of philosopher Martin Heidegger, “feeling can be much more trusted than reason because it’s a direct

intelligent attunement to what is.” As a form of intelligent, inter-relational attunement, feeling is a valid path of direct knowing.

The capitol of the feeling body is the heart center, where we most deeply experience the flow of exchange with life and other beings. And this flowing quality of pure feeling can often be felt as blissful. (In Tantric Buddhism it is said that the essence of feeling is bliss.) While the earthy vitality of the sensation body is a primordial aliveness that is pre-personal, or not yet personal, the feeling body and heart center are the personal expression of our humanness and our human capacity for personal inter-relatedness.

The third dimension of the wisdom body is *the awareness body*— the body experienced as a field of spacious, wakeful knowing. If the flow of the feeling body is like water and the simplicity of the sensation body is like earth, the transparency of the awareness body is more like space. The capitol of the awareness body is the head center, located behind the third eye center in the middle of the brain, between the ears. While the belly center embodies our connection to earth, and the heart center embodies what is most essentially human, the head center embodies our connection to heaven— the vast space and wisdom of the living universe. The awareness body is supra-personal.

Ultimately, all three aspects of the wisdom body are forms of awareness. The sensation body is the vibrant pulse of awareness, the feeling body is the flow of awareness, and the awareness body is the space of awareness. Direct sensing, direct feeling, and direct knowing—these are three ways of experiencing the subtle body as a field of presence.

THE KARMIC BODY

Just as the sky becomes hidden by an overlay of clouds, the openness of the wisdom body is often obscured by the cloudiness of our conditioned patterns. This overlay is the *karmic body*— the body as a storehouse of conditioning from the past. While the wisdom body is up-to-date, always in direct contact with what's going on in the present moment, the karmic body is comprised of unconscious, undigested conditioning from the past—everything that we haven't fully related to, processed, and clarified. All of this conditioning becomes stored in the cells and tissues of the body as well as in the neural circuits.

When we're caught up in the karmic body, we experience being tied up in knots, stuck in the mind, cold, cloudy, ungrounded, shut down, or disconnected. And these conditioned patterns of mental thought, emotional reactivity and physical tension keep replaying themselves over and over again, blocking access to the larger presence of the wisdom body. Yet each time they replay, we have an opportunity to see them for what they are and work on digesting them, which requires awareness . This requires a shift into the wisdom body, with its sense of flow, openness, warmth, clarity, and relaxation.

The karmic body covers up the wisdom body in three ways. *The tension body*— the body as a field of tension— covers up and obscures the earthy groundedness of the sensation body. *The emotional body*— the body as a storehouse of emotional reactivity— covers up and disrupts the communion and flow of the feeling body. And *the mental body*— the body as a network of conditioned beliefs, stories, and thought patterns— covers up and distorts the clear, spacious

knowing of the awareness body. Now let us consider these three dimensions of the karmic body in more detail.

THE TENSION BODY

Bodily tension is a movement of up and away, akin to the fingers curling up and closing. When tense, we are “stuck up,” or “uptight”— up and tight. Tension arises out of saying “no” to something we perceive as painful or threatening. As soon as we do that, our muscles tighten. As children, we didn’t know how to handle pain, how to process and digest it. So we learned to reject or repress it. The tension body starts to form out of this pattern of pushing away what threatens us. As we try to hold on to what feels pleasant and push away what feels painful, the whole body becomes riddled with tension. If you carefully sense each part of the body, you will find that tension, subtle or gross, is everywhere. This tension body covers up and prevents us from settling into our vital sensation body. It is a primal form of disconnection.

THE EMOTIONAL BODY

The emotional body covers up the feeling body with patterns of emotional reactivity based on wounding from the past. These emotional patterns block our access to true feeling. There is a big difference between feeling and emotion. Feeling is a way of tuning in and connecting with where we are, while emotion (which literally means “to move out of”) carries us away from ourselves. We become swept up in it. Emotionality seeks release or discharge because it doesn’t feel good to be so caught *up*.

Underlying our emotions there is a deeper complex of genuine feeling. Depression, for example, is usually a frozen expression of more fluid feelings that lie underneath— perhaps sorrow, pain,

anger, or vulnerability. When we connect directly to these deeper feelings, they become a doorway that helps us connect with what is going on inside us.

Frozen emotion, by contrast, keeps us locked up and out of the feeling body. It is a defense against going down and into the vulnerability of the feeling body, which is tender and very sensitive.

Genuine feeling, on the other hand, is a depth of experiencing that serves as an entry-point into the life stream of the unfolding present. It's flowing, not coagulated. It's an intelligent attunement to what is happening, not a reaction against anything.

THE MENTAL BODY

The mental body, which covers up the awareness body, is made up of habitual thought patterns about self and other, world and reality. This is the home of the false self and fixed identities: who we think we are. The mental body contains all the old beliefs, stories, and mind-movies that cloud our perception and drive our behavior.

The mental body grows out of our attempt to control reality through the mind, interpreting everything through fixed points of view. These mental constructions block clear, direct knowing, perceiving, and awareness. If the tension body is a storehouse of physical tightening, and the emotional body is a storehouse of emotional tightening, the mental body is a storehouse of mental tightening, otherwise known as *fixation*. Mental fixation is the grasping of the mind as it forms judgments, points of view, and strategies for controlling reality.

The core fixation is that I am over here, separate from something other over there. Once we fixate on something *other*, then the next step is to judge it. Do I like it, do I not like it, is it safe or

threatening? Is it for me or is it against me? Should I accept it, or reject it? We are continually ensnared in our concepts: It should be like this, it shouldn't be like that, it's good, it's bad, it's right, it's wrong. Based on these concepts, mind-movies start to develop, and we see the world through these lenses. The whole of our conditioned perception is based on fixation, the freezing of attention on objects and separating ourselves from them.

We take this fixated mind for granted because our whole culture is caught up in it. Our culture trains us to go after *things*. Thinking is “thinging.” The ability to narrowly focus is an important capacity, but when the mind becomes addicted to fixation, we can no longer see how everything is part of a larger field — the web of life. Nothing ever exists apart and alone, separate from this web. But when we fixate, we lift things out of their context and turn them into isolated objects of thought. We could sum this all up in three words spoken by the Dalai Lama when asked how he would characterize the Western world: “Lost in thought.”

To free ourselves from our addiction to thinging, we need to discover the quality of our mind that is not lost in thought. True human freedom lies in liberation from the mind that fixates. It comes from resting in open awareness, which is the true, essential nature of the mind.

MOVING FROM KARMIC BODY TO WISDOM BODY

How then can we move out of the karmic body and live more fully in the wisdom body? Perhaps the simplest way to move from the karmic body into the wisdom body is through *bhoga*, a Sanskrit term that Swami Prajnanpad used to mean “having direct, conscious experience of something,” or “digesting our experience.” For

example, we can begin to enter the field of the sensation body by becoming more mindful of bodily sensations, and this also helps us connect with the belly center and its qualities, such as groundedness, simplicity, or humility. We can access the feeling body by opening more fully to what we actually feel. For example, when we feel and open to our sadness, we also feel a certain tender-heartedness, which is the basis for compassion and love. If we can't open to our sadness, then our heart can't open. In this way, sensation and feeling become doorways into embodied presence.

Working with the karmic body follows the same principle: It requires having a direct, conscious experience of our bodily felt knots and blockages. Normally we're not that aware of our tensions. Once we bring these knots into awareness and start to feel them, we realize that they don't feel good. That's part of the *bhoga*: Feeling these knots allows us to realize that we don't want to keep walking around with them. Instead of avoiding them or covering them up, if we bring awareness to them, the subtle body naturally responds. It starts to come alive. The body naturally wants to move toward freedom, release, and openness.

There's an embodiment practice that I call "melting down the tension body," where you systematically feel the tension in every part of the body, while also bringing awareness right into the tension—which is like sunlight permeating ice. The sun of awareness is a warm openness that doesn't have any agenda or attitude toward the tension—and this what can melt the tension that frozen in the body. The key is to bring awareness to the tension by meeting your experience directly, making contact with it without any judgment

about it. Direct contact without judgment allows the tension body to start opening into the sensation body.

The same process applies when moving from the emotional body into the feeling body. You start with a feeling or emotion and meet it with unconditional presence, which involves opening to it just as it is. Often we think that if we open to a difficult feeling, such as sadness, it means we're going to feel more sad. It can seem that way at first, because we haven't been letting ourselves feel it much at all. So when we drop our resistance and start to meet our feelings and emotions directly, it can be intense at first. But when we meet emotion with awareness, it is like the sun melting ice. The emotion starts to move, to enter the flowing lifestream of present experiencing. And once it starts to flow, we don't experience more sadness—we experience more openness.

Our belief that feelings and emotions are too much to handle comes from the mind of the child who didn't have the resources to process and digest them and who doesn't believe he or she can handle the experience. In fact, as a child we couldn't handle it, and that's why we shut it down. But as adults we can learn to thaw out our coagulated emotions by simply allowing them to be held in conscious awareness.

To move from the mental body into the awareness body, we need to develop a more conscious relationship with our thoughts. People don't normally have a relationship with their thoughts—they are just identified with them. They live *within* the thoughts. In this case, *bhoga* would involve developing a direct, conscious experience of the thoughts themselves. That's what we do in meditation practice: we have a direct experience of our thoughts and a direct experience

of the fixation that's involved in them. We experience how painful it is to sit still and feel the mind continually gripping, gripping, gripping. But if we can be with our thoughts in wakeful awareness, without any attitude toward them, then the fixation gradually releases because it doesn't have anything to fight with.

By bringing thought and fixation into awareness, we boycott our identification with them. Awareness is direct seeing, which doesn't have an attitude, a slant, or a spin. It just sees what is. In awareness thoughts appear dreamlike, or evanescent like clouds in the sky. Awareness is like the larger sky that thoughts and feelings pass through. If we can experience awareness free from thought, then our fixation on thoughts begins to release. We find that it feels much better to rest in open awareness than to be continually caught up in thought.

By having direct conscious experience of the frozen structures of the karmic body, we bring them into the life stream, the flow of present experiencing. *Bhoga* is a digestion process. Things that have become encapsulated islands or log jams in the flow of our life start to dissolve back into the lifestream. Along with this flow, there's an openness and a groundedness. Our life becomes centered in the groundedness of the sensation body, the flow of the feeling body, and the openness of the awareness body.

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