INTRODUCTION

ONE

Touching Enlightenment with the Body

Many years ago, while engaged in research for my book *Buddhist Saints in India,*[1] I ran across a phrase—"touching enlightenment with the body"—that instantly captured my imagination and subsequently became a prolonged contemplation extending over at least two decades. Later, unsuccessfully, I tried to determine where I had first seen these words: Was it in a Pali text? Was it in a translation or commentary from the Theravadin tradition? Did I find it in a Mahayana or Vajrayana meditation manual? Or, perhaps, did I simply dream it or make it up?

Be that as it may, "touching enlightenment with the body" has defined my meditative life for a long time. What I still find so compelling is its suggestion that we are not to see enlightenment, but to *touch* it, and, further, that we are to touch it not with our thought or our mind, but with our *body*. It is interesting

1 Reginald A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

that this phrase of mysterious origin has many analogues within the Theravadin tradition itself: enlightenment, for humans, is frequently presented as a somatic experience. Dogen, the founder of the Japanese Soto School of Zen, sometimes spoke of the body as the gateway to ultimate realization, and the Dzogchen teachings of Tibet affirm that enlightenment is found in the body.

What can such affirmations possibly mean? In what way can the body be thought to play such a central and fundamental role in the life of meditation? This question becomes all the more interesting and compelling in our contemporary context, when so many people are acutely feeling their own personal disembodiment and finding themselves strongly drawn to somatic practices and therapies of all kinds.

I bring to this question my own practice and teaching of meditation over the past four decades. During this period, many things have surprised me, but none more than the growing and somewhat anguished realization that simply practicing meditation doesn't necessarily yield results. Many of us, when we first encountered Buddhism, found its invitation to freedom and realization through meditation extraordinarily compelling. We jumped in with a lot of enthusiasm, rearranged life priorities around our meditation, and put much time and energy into the practice.

Engaging meditation in such a focused way, some do discover the kind of continually unfolding transformation they are looking for. But more often than not, at least in my own experience as a meditation teacher, that doesn't happen. It is true that when we practice meditation on a daily basis, we often find a definite sense of relief

and peace. Over a period of a year or two, we may feel that things are moving in a positive direction in terms of reducing our internal agitation and stress, and developing openness. All of this has value.

But if we have been practicing for twenty or thirty years, it is not uncommon to find ourselves arriving in a quite different and far more troubling place. We may feel that somewhere along the line we have lost track of what we are doing and things have somehow gotten bogged down. We may find that the same old habitual patterns continue to grip us. The same kinds of disquieting emotions arise, the same interpersonal blockages and basic life confusion, the same unfulfilled and agonizing spiritual longing that led us to meditation in the first place. Was our original inspiration defective? Is there something wrong with the practices or the traditions we have been following? Is there something wrong with us? Have we misapplied the instructions, or is it perhaps that we are just not up to them?

My own sense is that there is a very real problem, though one that is not found in any of these questions and doubts, but rather in an entirely different direction. My experience suggests that our problem is very simple: we are attempting to practice meditation and to follow a spiritual path in a disembodied state, and this is inevitably doomed to failure. To put it simply, the full benefits and fruition of meditation cannot be experienced or enjoyed when we are not grounded in our bodies. The phrase "touching enlightenment with the body," then, when understood fully, doesn't just imply that we are *able* to touch enlightenment with our bodies; beyond that, it suggests that—except in and through our bodies—there actually is no other way to do so.

TWO

What Has Become of the Buddha's Dharma?

Readers will notice that this book represents a comprehensive description of the Buddhist meditative path, or the *dharma*—the legacy of the Buddha—viewed from the standpoint of "meditating with the body." It is even an approach to spirituality and the spiritual life altogether. Readers may occasionally ask, "Why not write just about Buddhism? Why keep the somatic metaphor at the center throughout this account? Isn't the body really just part of the dharma, somewhat tangential, helpful perhaps, but an adjunct to the main thing?"

By way of an initial response—for it will take this entire book to respond fully—in this and the next few chapters, I would like to offer some general observations. Let me begin by referring to the various Buddhist meditative traditions that have appeared most prominently among modern, especially Western, practitioners, including the various forms of Zen, Japanese, Chinese (Ch'an), and Korean (Seon); the Theravadin-inspired Vipassana

movement; and, of course, Tibetan Buddhism. One cannot help but feel appreciation for each of these great traditions and for how much of them has been transmitted into the modern context.

At the same time, as a historian of religion by training, I am also aware that religions transiting from one culture to another—particularly when they have strong ambitions for wide success and manage to become perceived as "important" in their new home—tend to become rather quickly conventionalized in the minds and even the experience of their adherents, assimilating to the preexisting values and perspectives of their new cultural context. As we study the history of such transiting in the case of Buddhism, an important question inevitably arises: Is the tradition still in some kind of recognizable contact with the identity and core inspirations of what it was before transition? Or has it assimilated to such an extent that it is tending more and more simply to mirror the values of its new environment? This is a question that many people, due to our collective experience of Buddhism for the past fifty years, are currently asking in relation to Buddhism in the West and particularly in relation to Tibetan Buddhism. If there is a characteristic quality or set of qualities that defines Buddhism as a practice and a vision of human fulfillment—and I believe there is—is it surviving in any significant way in the modern context?

To cite the Tibetan case with which I am most familiar, many of the various Western Tibetan Buddhist communities have deliberately distanced themselves from the early, somewhat freewheeling but also open and intensely exploratory and creative days of the latter 1960s and 1970s, when Tarthang Tulku, Chögyam Trungpa,

Kalu Rinpoche, and other Tibetan lamas were first teaching in Europe and America. In a trend that I suspect may be a default to our Western cultural norms, now within Tibetan Buddhism in the West, there has been a pronounced institutionalization and conventionalization. This is reflected in many communities in a strong sense of appropriate behavior, authorized approaches to the tradition, bureaucratic rules and regulations, orthodox political viewpoints, and particular attitudes, ways of speaking, and even ways of thinking that are implicitly enjoined upon members within the various communities.

Surface appearances sometimes to the contrary, Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism often seem enclosed in a kind of self-contained, ideological bubble that mimics attitudes and values of their Tibetan teachers. Within this bubble, there is often little interest in seriously engaging those outside of their immediate religious circle, including not only the larger religious and secular worlds of their Western context, but also other varieties of Buddhism and even of Tibetan Buddhism itself. Along with this, it is also not uncommon to come across practitioners who hold intensely derogatory views of Western culture and its religious inspirations as well as abysmal estimations of the spiritual capacities of modern people, including, sadly, themselves. This leads typically to a static, unhealthy, lifelong dependence on "the Tibetan lamas" as the source of all wisdom, power, and authority. Thus, Western practitioners find themselves "infantilized" in a kind of permanent state of spiritual—and, sadly, also emotional and developmental—immaturity.

The kind of open-ended curiosity, non-dogmatic flexibility, exploration, and creativity that particularly Trungpa Rinpoche and Tarthang Tulku envisioned when they were first teaching in America, and also their vision of the full transmission of the Tibetan dharma into the West and to Westerners, has somehow not materialized except among a few teachers and their students. Generally, one sees a strong amalgamation of Vajrayana practices with Tibetan cultural forms and values promoted as "the dharma," with other approaches that may deviate from this normalized amalgamation condemned as "non-Tibetan," "disrespectful to the lamas," "ego-centric," or even "non-dharmic." My guess is that those familiar with the Western institutionalization of the Vipassana movement and of Ch'an and Zen—including the Western teachers of these traditions—may possibly be able to report parallel observations reflecting their specific histories.

All of this can lead to some very vexing questions indeed. What happened to the Buddha's instruction to his students to remain free from fixed views? Where is his injunction to avoid overly institutionalizing and bureaucratizing his teachings? Where is the freedom from social, racial, or cultural identification and bias that so clearly characterizes his teachings? Where is his promise of the potential of each person to reach a fully realized, that is, fully mature and individuated, state of being? In short, what has become of the Buddha's dharma?

THREE

The Call of the Forest

In the Buddhist past, when questions have arisen about the authenticity of institutionalized, conventionalized Buddhist organizations, politics, beliefs, and practices, practitioners have retired into the "forest" (*sktî, vana, aranya),* the classical term for the uninhabited jungles of India. The "forest" was regarded as a place beyond the reach of conventional culture and institutionalized Buddhism, a place where the atmosphere was open and unobstructed. The forest was understood as a trackless waste, a place for all those "others" standing outside of conventional culture, such as wild animals, gods and demons, and people beyond the pale. The latter included lunatics, criminals, the terminally ill, the most extreme outcasts, and, most important, those spiritual practitioners who literally walked away from the conventionalized religious systems of India seeking "the origin of all things."

Within Indian culture, the forest was considered the ideal place for spiritual practice because, in the forest, *there are no rules*

and there are no presiding authorities. The only authority is the chaos of the forest itself. The only rule is what awaits there for each practitioner, uniquely, to discover. Memories of the past and plans for the future, the psychic infrastructure of civilization, do not apply: they have no bearing and they have no footing. The forest is about something else. In the forest, there is only the ever-present possibility of events, encounters, and insights that emerge directly from reality itself, pure and unpolluted by human wants, expectations, and attitudes. Uniquely in the forest, the most radical of all human journeys can take place, one which brings us into direct contact with primordial being. Generally, the greatest saints of Buddhist tradition both in India and in larger Asia were products, so to speak, of the forest; fed up with the limitations of the town-and-village culture of institutionalized Buddhism, inspired by those who had gone before, they disappeared into the forest for years, decades, or even for life.

Increasingly in this world of ours, there is no longer any geographical forest for us practitioners to retire to. It is not just that the places frequented by lonely meditators have been overrun by modern civilization—forests sold off to multinational corporations and quickly cut down, roads built through retreat areas, social, political, and economic policies that effectively destroy the possibility of forest renunciation. It is also that even the idea of the "forest" has become largely marginalized in modern Buddhism. Every manifestation of Buddhism, it now seems, must immediately demonstrate "social engagement" and "ethical impact." It is not, as we shall see below, that these

are unimportant values. But now, more and more, they have become a litmus test to determine which forms of Buddhism are acceptable and which are not. Thus, the true forest is quickly disappearing, perhaps forever, from our world.

But there is a new wilderness, a new trackless waste, a new unknown and limitless territory, a new terrain of chaos, that calls us. It is a territory—I do believe—that has not been, and cannot be, colonized and domesticated by human ambition and greed, that in its true extent cannot be mapped by human logic at all. This is the "forest" of the human body. The body is now, I believe, our forest, our jungle, the "outlandish" expanse in which we are invited to let go of everything we think, allow ourselves to be stripped down to our most irreducible person, to die in every experiential sense possible and see what, if anything, remains.

In this, I am speaking not of the body we *think* we have, the body we conceptualize as part of our "me" or my self-image. Rather, I am talking about the body that we meet when we are willing to descend into it, to surrender into its darkness and its mysteries, and to explore it with our awareness. As we shall see, this true, limitless body cannot even be entered until we are willing to leave our own thinking process behind—on the surface, so to speak. It is similar to the deep-sea diver: while floating on the surface of the sea, he knows little of what lies below, but when he descends into its depths, the limitless worlds of the ocean open to him. It was of this ever unbounded and unknown body that the great siddha Saraha spoke when he said, "There is no place of pilgrimage as fabulous and as open as this body of mine, no place more worth exploring."

FOUR

The Ultimate Challenge of Buddhism

The return to the forest of the body, then, necessitates our willingness to step beyond any and all adherence to the past and its traditions. At the same time, for me and in this book, it is the ancient and venerable Buddhist tradition itself that provides guidance and many of the means to accomplish this process. It is interesting to consider how Buddhism—itself so "traditional"—points the way beyond any and all human traditions and, right now, calls us into the chaos of the naked spiritual life.

As Walpola Rahula, in *What the Buddha Taught,* pointed out, Buddhism has always maintained that spirituality is not the possession of any one tradition. In fact, particularly in the Mahayana, spirituality is not something that can in any way be separated from human life itself; in a very real sense, the spiritual journey and human existence are one and the same. In this sense, Buddhism—particularly in its Vajrayana form— may be preserving the ancient spirituality of our aboriginal ancestors and

present-day hunters and gatherers for whom—in contrast to many of the "high religions"—to be human is to be spiritual; there is no separation between spirituality and life itself.

According to the teachings of buddha nature, each of us possesses, at our very root and core, a profound and irresistible longing. This is nothing other than a longing to become fully and completely who we are, to experience ourselves and our lives, fully and freely, without doubt, reservation, or holding back. This final realization of ourselves is described as all-loving and powerful—we discover ourselves as everything that we need to be and, because of that, we become completely available to the world and its suffering beings, and discover utter trust and confidence in life.

Because it is who we are, spirituality is not something that we need to seek outside of ourselves. In a way, it is not even something that we can gain or attain. Rather, it is the depth and subtlety of our person and of our experience that we gradually uncover. Religious traditions are usually necessary for providing an understanding of our inborn potential and for showing us how to realize it. But when they claim proprietary ownership of that which we seek, they betray themselves and get in our way. Such are the teachings of Buddhism, and its warning, from its earliest days down to the present.

Buddhism, in its most subtle and sophisticated expression, is not a tradition that seeks to provide answers to life's questions or to dispense "wisdom" to allay our fundamental angst. Rather, it challenges us to look beyond any and all answers that we may have found along the way, to meet ourselves in a naked, direct, and

fearless fashion. Not providing answers, as Stephen Batchelor has shown us, Buddhism instead proposes a process of radical questioning. In fact, it challenges us to question everything that we think and feel about ourselves and our reality—all our most basic beliefs, all our assumptions and preconceptions, even the way we habitually see, hear, and sense the world. We must be willing to let go of everything we have believed—every answer that we have come up with down to this moment—in order to find out the final truth of who we are.

This process of questioning may initially be conception; it may involve actually seeing something that we are thinking is so and then asking ourselves, "But is this really the case?" But quickly it moves into the silent sphere of meditative practice—thoughts, feelings, perceptions arise as we meditate. Each time, we find ourselves reacting to them, labeling, judging, pigeonholing them, based on what we have previously thought or assumed. Each time, we look directly at what is arising to see what it really is, beyond our preconceptions, as it abides in the bright light of its own being. In this process, we learn so much about how we limit even our most basic experiences. In seeing how we hold back, we are able to let go, to surrender into a greater sense of openness and being. Thus the journey begins to unfold.

While religious traditions tend to some extent to be exclusive regarding our experience, the path of radical questioning is a universally inclusive process. In this, Buddhism invites us to take seriously our entire human existence, to take everything in our life "as the path." It proposes that everything that ever happens

to us is part of our journey toward realization. There is finally nothing that leads us away, no possibility of true regression, no actual mistake; everything is learning, opening, and moving forward, even when the opposite seems to be the case. This leads to a kind of fundamental and boundless optimism about what human life is and why we are here, and an underlying trust that runs through life's most difficult circumstances. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that any tradition could ever hold such an overflowing optimism and joy in human life and its process, but Buddhism aspires to be the exception.

Buddhism also asserts that the spiritual journey is unique to each individual. Therefore, of course, it cannot be held, circumscribed, limited, or even ultimately judged by any institution, tradition, or external authority. The unique journey that lies before us does not exist in any text, external person, or religion. In fact, it does not yet exist at all, but only lies ahead of us, to be discovered literally as we go. Thus it is that the spiritual journey cannot in any way be preconceived or predetermined; it is not humanly constructed or fabricated. The journey to ourselves is truly a journey into the unknown, a setting forth onto a sea that has never before been sailed and never before been fathomed or mapped.

The role of tradition, at least according to Buddhism, is thus not to limit the search, the experience, the journey, but to open us to it—tradition here is inspiration, challenge, and provocation, and some helpful practices, not a set of answers. It provides us with a sailing vessel, but then leaves it up to us to set sail

toward a truly new world, to find whatever we may find. Yes, such a prospect is daunting. Yes, it is the ultimate human challenge, the most difficult thing any person can ever do. And yet, as noted, it is something that is written within us from the very beginning, in our genes and in our bones. As we shall see, this journey is written in the body itself, in its deepest levels and its most subtle layers. In journeying into the body, we are making a voyage toward our deepest selves. When we do so, we not only find ourselves more and more drawn to the possibility of realizing who we are, we find ourselves already deeply engaged in the journey itself.