

A Guide
to
Embodied
Spirituality

Your
Deepest
Ground

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1

Embodying the Ground



Inside of you and inside of everyone, reality is moving to wake all of itself up to itself. Everything within our human structure is going to be uncovered in the process.

—Adyashanti, *The End of Your World*

What does it mean to embody spirit? Most simply, it means to recognize and live in accord with our true nature as spacious, loving awareness. It also means that our deepest knowing is visceral and vibrant and that our ordinary life is increasingly congruent with this knowing. For this deep embodiment to take place, we need a clear mind, an open heart, and a spacious sense of the ground. If the first great step of the inner spiritual pilgrimage is from the head to

the heart, the next step is from the heart to the ground. This is a natural descent of awareness down and into the body that is profoundly liberating. Opening to the ground is a poorly understood yet critically important part of the spiritual quest. Despite its importance, relatively little has been explicitly taught or written about it, especially for the Western spiritual practitioner. The primary reason for this has been the unconscious fear of annihilation that arises if a deep letting go is allowed.

In my over forty years of inner work with students and clients, the subjective presence or absence of inner ground has been the most important theme I've worked with. I've repeatedly observed how people's inner process of deepening and opening up is sabotaged by their terror of letting go. People really struggle to navigate this murky area (examples to come in subsequent chapters). Mature spiritual explorers become mired here for years. Perhaps you are one of them? With this book I shed some light on this obscure, difficult-to-navigate territory. A bit of clear guidance can go a long way!

The psychological conditioning that obscures our clear access to the ground is both dense and charged. This conditioning is hard to approach experientially because it threatens the mind's illusion of control and often deeply impacts the nervous system. The portal to the ground usually lies within the shadow of fear. As we face our fears, we find our ground.

Many cultures have myths about a difficult underground descent marked by intense challenges and great discoveries, by death and rebirth. In these myths, the underworld is often a hell realm where the hero must confront and overcome demigods or demons, some quite graphically described. In the Greek myth, a heartbroken Orpheus descends into the underworld to retrieve his lover Euridyce, who died from a snakebite on their wedding day. First, though, he has to charm Hades, the god of hell, to gain entrance. In *The Divine Comedy*, written in the early fourteenth century, Dante Alighieri depicts his encounter with an enormous three-headed devil with bat-like wings that lives at the very bottom of a hellish inferno. Interestingly,

everything there is frozen in ice since it is farthest from the warmth and light of the sun. While the devil munches on the great betrayer Judas, Dante must crawl down “the shaggy coat of the king demon” in order to leave and enter Purgatorio, the next phase of the spiritual journey. We see a modern version of this story in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, where Gandalf grapples with the terrifying underground demon Balrog as they plunge into a dark abyss. He disappears for a long while, then returns brilliantly transfigured. It’s a compelling metaphor: the descent into darkness that often precedes an ascent into light. And it is a theme we will return to repeatedly in this book.

The human psyche has been pointing us toward this seemingly perilous descent as long as we have dreamed and shared stories. At some point we must all crawl down the shaggy coat of our human conditioning in order to discover a more profound reality. Yet we often fear that opening to this underground dimension will bring terror, the loss of control, disconnection, and annihilation. Who wants to go there? In truth, this journey is rarely as difficult as we imagine.

Because of our individual and collective avoidance, our sense of the ground remains largely unconscious and *underground*. We do not realize how deeply ungrounded we actually are. We do not see how driven we are by fear—both physical and psychological—and how shaky our foundations are.

Survival fear is the undertone of our fragile human lives. If we step back and carefully observe, we can see how we organize our lives around trying to be safe. We unconsciously protect our bodies *and* our self-images. The two are intimately interwoven because we are social beings. We need food, shelter, physical safety, touch, *and* a secure connection to others. As much as we prize our individual freedom, at our core we are deeply tribal. This means we strive to be valued and loved by others, and therefore we unconsciously fear rejection, exclusion, disability, and death. Maintaining an acceptable self-image, one that is valued by the community, is a core survival strategy. As a

result, we create elaborate defenses, many of them unconscious, to protect ourselves.

The fear of annihilation is the greatest saboteur of the spiritual quest. We want to be loved and feel safe. Generally, the spiritual quest severely challenges both of these goals, at least as they are conventionally understood. In fact, as we deepen in our spiritual understanding, we eventually come to realize that this fear is unfounded. We *are* the love we seek, and our fundamental nature can never be harmed. Yet these are hard-earned experiential insights that require a profound letting go and opening up that only come from honestly facing our experience just as it is and deeply inquiring into who we really are.

The Ground Defined (Lightly)

I define the ground subjectively as a vibrant *felt-sense* of space and stability that encompasses the lower belly and the area beneath the body. We can sense the presence or absence of this ground in the interior of our body. The words *ground* and *space* rarely dance well together, but here they do nicely. When we are deeply grounded, the lower belly feels alive and there is a sense of having landed in oneself. Conversely, when we are ungrounded, we may feel cut off, numb, or subtly shaky at our base, as if the rug could be pulled out from under us at any moment. I'm sure you've experienced this at some point in your life; I certainly have. I suspect this is one reason why earthquakes are so unsettling. They reflect how unstable our conditioned inner ground actually is.

Beyond the physical body, I am also using ground as a metaphor for various levels of reality. In this sense, we can be both relatively and absolutely grounded. The relative ground refers to being conscious of our thoughts, feelings, and sensations—whether gross or subtle. For example, if we are mentally grounded, we are not lost in our thoughts and we are able to think clearly. If we are emotionally grounded, we can experience our reactive feelings without being absorbed in them and also feel love, gratitude, appreciation, grief, empathy, and compassion. If we are physically grounded, we can feel our body

regardless of its health or capabilities, love being in nature, and feel at home in the physical world. If we are subtly grounded, we can sense the subtle energies in the interior of our body as well as our subtle interconnectedness with others. We may also connect with archetypal energies of the collective unconscious, as Carl Jung described in his strange, tumultuous, and seminal *The Red Book*. Overall, the more we are in touch with our relative reality, the more relatively grounded we feel.

The absolute ground refers to the groundless ground or ground of being. This is the source of everything that appears, all of our experiences, the domain of pure potentiality, what we may call the deepest “reality.” It feels both empty and full. Since this groundless ground is not an object, it is ungraspable by the ordinary mind. We literally cannot wrap our minds around it. It is before all experience and empty of all definitions, stories, and images. It is not a thing; it is no-thing or a non-thing. It is not even an “it.” It is nonlocatable, prior to space and time. Yet every “thing” arises from and returns to it, like the waves of an ocean. We can know it by consciously being it. If this sounds completely abstract and puzzling, that’s okay. You’ll likely get a better sense of it as you read further, especially if you engage with some of the inquiries and meditations provided.

We call the absolute ground many things—the Radiant Void, Godhead, Tao, Buddha Nature, Christ Consciousness, or the Great Mystery, to name a few. It doesn’t matter, though, since words and thoughts cannot define it. We know it directly via inner silence and stillness, by being aware that we are aware. Jean Klein, my first foundational teacher, called it our home ground because when we consciously recognize it, we feel profoundly at home. We feel a deep inner stability, ease, and sense of well-being no matter what is happening in our life. When we are in touch with absolute reality, we feel absolutely grounded.

Reality is inherently grounding when we accept it. The more in touch with it and accepting we are, the more grounded we feel. Yet reality is ungrounding if we do not accept and live in accord with it. If

we pretend to be someone we are not, we will feel ungrounded. If we are in a relationship with someone or engaged in work that is deeply incongruent, it will be unsettling to face this reality, at least at first.

The truth is disruptive to any individual or collective system that is based upon its denial. As a result, we may first experience a period of disorientation on the spiritual quest before we reorient to a deeper, more authentic life. It depends upon how honest we've been with ourselves. Regardless of our work and relationships, if we take ourself as a separate self, as a solitary fragment disconnected from the whole of life, we will find ourself living in an unstable daydream. Life has a way of waking us up from this illusion, though sometimes quite rudely.

My Journey with the Ground

My journey of opening to the ground has been gradual. While the opening of the mind and heart happened fairly close to each other in my early fifties, the opening of the ground has been much slower. This seems to be the case with most people. It is as if the dirty dishes of my underground conditioning have been soaking in presence for years. Occasionally residues soften and old knots release. For example, it has felt like subtle layers of tension in my solar plexus and the base of my spine have been slowly melting and releasing for years. In my experience, it takes time for the light of awareness to penetrate and transform these denser layers of the body-mind. As this happens, we become more like an attuned musical instrument that can sound in uniquely creative ways or like a stained glass window that allows a primal light to shine through and refract in distinctive colors.

We are all being worked on by a greater intelligence, whether we realize it or not. Occasionally we have glimpses and foretastes of this unfolding process. For example, the theme of this book was foreshadowed nearly fifty years ago while I was on a long meditation retreat in the Swiss Alps. During an especially deep meditation I saw a brilliant, multicolored light bridge spanning the earth and the heavens—a rainbow bridge. While I recognized that it was an important image, at the time I only dimly intuited its meaning. Looking back, I now

recognize that it was the seed form of my life's work—to illuminate the importance of the body as we embody our deepest understanding.

Since those early days of long meditation retreats, I've discovered that the body acts as a bridge between the relative and absolute levels of reality, between the earth and the sky, between form and formlessness. As we let go of who we think and feel we are and what our body is, the body opens up and an underlying seamlessness reveals itself. We discover that our body, along with the most ordinary moments and objects of life, are sacred expressions of our innate wholeness.

As I explore the theme of the ground with you in this book, I will describe this sacred ordinariness—this nonseparateness of spirit and matter—as vividly as I can and invite you to discover the truth of it for yourself. This discovery changes the way we individually live and, if enough people participate, how we live collectively. It is a shift from living on the surface of our life to living from the deep ground.

The Challenge of Embodying Our Spiritual Understanding

Many of us have discovered that our true nature is open, wise, and loving, and yet we act otherwise, getting lost in our old stories and emotional reactions. We forget who we are and act out. Have you ever wondered, *Why is this still happening?*

Part of the answer is that we are all deeply conditioned human beings, and some degree of forgetting and reactivity will always happen as long as we are in a body. In my view, despite our idealized images of saints and sages, it is unrealistic to think that we will ever be reaction-free. Recognizing this allows us to relax whatever self-perfection project we may be caught in. However, I do think it is realistic to expect that, as our spiritual understanding deepens, we will react less. That's been my experience. My feathers still get ruffled from time to time but far less frequently or intensely these days.

Our conditioning runs deep—very deep. And it resides on many levels, most of which are unconscious. An iceberg is a good metaphor for this since the bulk of our conditioning is frozen below the surface of the conscious mind. It shows up as subconscious core limiting beliefs,

reactive emotions, and somatic contractions, forming an interactive bundle that fuels one another. For example, regardless of conscious understanding, if we subconsciously believe that we are unworthy, we will also feel ashamed and likely experience a clench somewhere in our body, usually in the heart area or gut. Often a limiting belief is the primary trigger for the reactive emotion. Sometimes, however, when difficult conditioning happens early on, such as trauma or a broken or weak relationship with a primary caretaker, a deep imprint is left upon the nervous system and body prior to any conscious thought. These take time—sometimes a long time—and often an attuned relationship to melt and unwind.

Our varied conditioning—whether from our childhood, our familial and cultural ancestors, or our shared experience as human beings—acts as veils that prohibit us from recognizing and embodying our true nature. Along with normal human developmental stages, this conditioning reinforces the illusion of being a separate self, disconnected from the whole of life.

Occasionally, these veils briefly part and we have a glimpse of our natural way of being—whole, intimate with all of life, inwardly free, peaceful, clear, loving, joyful, and grateful for no reason. These openings can happen spontaneously at any time—as children or adults, in nature, during meditation, in the presence of a genuine teacher, under extreme duress, or during a guided medicine journey. Indigenous peoples have sacramentally used psychedelics for millennia to peer behind these veils, and as such, psychedelics have become a common first door into temporary ego transcendence for several generations of Westerners.

These glimpses behind the veils are very useful. They reveal what is most deeply true. Once we know ourself outside of the apparent prison of the separate self, we are less likely to fall under its spell. A spark has been ignited. We may also sense this inner radiance without a dramatic glimpse and simply be drawn by a quiet knowing that there's more to life than what we think and see. One way or another, a search ensues and we begin to find our way home.

We are called to find out who we really are, which requires a careful investigation into who we have mis-taken ourself to be. Almost always, we will need to clearly see and see through a number of multilayered veils. As these veils thin, the light grows stronger. And as the light grows stronger, it is easier to see through the veils. The mind, heart, and body become more open and illumined, and as a result, we increasingly embody the light of awareness.

At some point a gravitational shift in identity may happen when we firmly know we are not bound by any identity. We are aware that we are aware, and we rest in and as this light of awareness. Instead of thinking and feeling *I am this image or story*, we realize an unconditioned sense of being. We can call this self-recognition or a spiritual awakening. When this shift happens, we are clear that awareness is the context and core of every experience. No matter what we experience—any particular thought, feeling, or sensation—we are also present *as* open, unqualified, and undefined awareness. If we have been vacationing with awareness for a while—that is, visiting it from time to time—we realize it is not just a pleasant and expansive state; rather, it is our home ground.

To know ourself so clearly, however, does not mean that this knowing automatically transposes to our ordinary life of relationships and work. It can take a while for the conditioned body-mind to catch up—a lifetime, in fact. There may be a large gap at first. This process of embodiment both precedes and follows self-recognition. A spiritual awakening of this magnitude is a catalyst. Whether pre- or post-awakening, the light of awareness increasingly imbues and transforms the conditioned body-mind.

Sourced increasingly in presence, when we rigorously question all of our disturbing thoughts as they arise and fully welcome our reactive feelings and constricted sensations with curiosity and affection and without an agenda to change or get rid of them, the gap between our deepest knowing and our ordinary human life closes. This book is about this open-ended process of embodiment, particularly as it relates to our densest resistance to opening to the ground.

Initial spiritual glimpses or awakenings are like flying coast to coast, where we are able to get a clear view of the passing landscape from thirty thousand feet. Embodying this understanding, however, is like crossing the land by foot. We get to have an intimate contact with the plains, rivers, mountains, deserts, and oceans—and their many inhabitants. We get to walk our talk close to the ground.