

in touch

*How to Tune In to the
Inner Guidance of Your Body
and Trust Yourself*

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

contents

FOREWORD	by Rick Hanson, PhD . . . ix
INTRODUCTION	In Touch with Your Inner Knowing . . . xi
PART I TWO VIEWS OF THE BODY . . . 1	
CHAPTER 1	The Science of Attunement . . . 3
CHAPTER 2	Felt Sensing and the Subtle Body . . . 27
PART II REDUCING THE NOISE . . . 55	
CHAPTER 3	Being with Experience: Shadows as Portals . . . 57
CHAPTER 4	Questioning Core Beliefs, Dialoguing with the Inner Critic, and Witnessing Thoughts . . . 79
PART III HEARING THE SIGNALS: SOMATIC QUALITIES OF INNER KNOWING . . . 99	
CHAPTER 5	Relaxed Groundedness . . . 101
CHAPTER 6	Inner Alignment . . . 123
CHAPTER 7	Openheartedness . . . 139
CHAPTER 8	Spaciousness . . . 157

CONTENTS

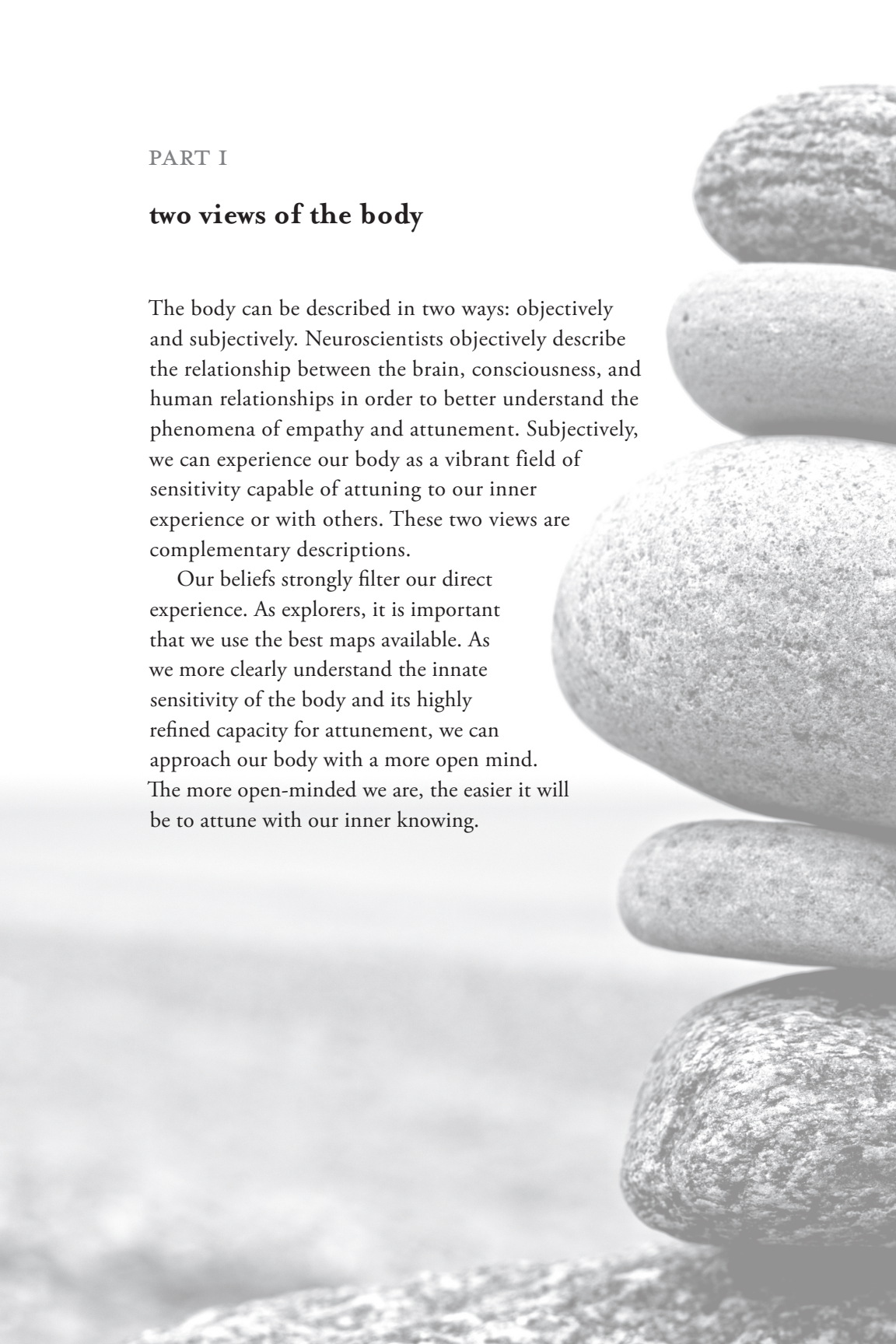
PART IV	THE FRUITS OF INNER KNOWING . . .	171
CHAPTER 9	Self-Recognition . . .	173
CHAPTER 10	The Great Intimacy . . .	183
CONCLUSION	The Sacred Ordinary . . .	189
	Notes . . .	193
	Bibliography . . .	197
	Acknowledgments . . .	201
	Index . . .	203
	About the Author . . .	213

PART I

two views of the body

The body can be described in two ways: objectively and subjectively. Neuroscientists objectively describe the relationship between the brain, consciousness, and human relationships in order to better understand the phenomena of empathy and attunement. Subjectively, we can experience our body as a vibrant field of sensitivity capable of attuning to our inner experience or with others. These two views are complementary descriptions.

Our beliefs strongly filter our direct experience. As explorers, it is important that we use the best maps available. As we more clearly understand the innate sensitivity of the body and its highly refined capacity for attunement, we can approach our body with a more open mind. The more open-minded we are, the easier it will be to attune with our inner knowing.



1

the science of attunement

*The most beautiful thing we can
experience is the mysterious. It is the
source of all true art and science.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

As David took a seat on my couch, he had a serious, intense look on his face. His long-term relationship was unraveling, and it looked like things were not going to end well. We quietly gazed with each other for a minute or two before he said, “I feel so unseen, unheard, and uncared for by her.”

As I listened to him, I experienced a particular combination of feeling and sensation in the center of my chest. It was something very cold, dark, and icy—a place of deep pain in the heart area. When I shared this feeling with him, he tuned into his own body and responded, “Yes, it feels that way. There’s a layer of rage here that I am reluctant to feel.” He gestured toward his chest and continued, “Beneath that there is a terrible loneliness and feeling of isolation. This goes back a long time. I felt this way as a child.”

As we continued to sit together, mostly in silence, and stayed with the difficult feelings and sensations, they began to thaw, like ice melting in the sun. After several minutes, David took a deep breath and

said, “It feels warmer and lighter now. There is more of a sense of space and ease. I don’t feel so alone with this.” I also sensed that a shift had happened—the cold constriction in my heart area had passed.

Somehow I was sharing David’s most difficult and intimate feelings without becoming lost in them. This spacious empathy, together with a shared focus of tenderness and understanding, allowed the feelings to transform by themselves. A three-way attunement was happening: David was attuning with his subtle interior feeling, I was attuning with mine, and we were attuning with each other. By attune, I mean to accurately sense and resonate with, as when a string on one guitar begins to vibrate in harmony with a string that has been plucked on another guitar.

What might contemporary science have to say about this attuned relational exchange? A surprising amount, it turns out.

Science is beginning to discover evidence for the kind of deeply subjective and attuned experiences that I shared with David. In this chapter we will take a quick tour through recent scientific research about attuning with others and ourselves, since the two are interrelated. I will touch upon the impact of a secure parent-child attachment on adult well-being, explore emotional resonance, describe the vital role that mirror neurons play in empathy, and touch upon our ability to attune with a deep, natural coherence within ourselves that corresponds to an inner knowing.

There may be a temptation to dismiss the relevance of any scientific investigation when we are exploring the sense of inner knowing that, by its nature, is self-validating. After all, we can usually sense to some degree when we are aligned and attuned with ourselves and when we are not. Yet we live in a scientific age, and empirical evidence is the currency of the time. The rational mind can relax more when it knows that intellectual honesty is at work and there is evidence supporting the existence of a sense of inner knowing. For some, objective evidence can calm the mind’s doubt and encourage a more careful listening to the quiet inner voice of knowing.

At the same time, it is important to realize that our subtle inner experiences will never be fully defined by our scientific understanding. Correlation is not necessarily causation. Further, we are learning more

every year about the transformative power of awareness, attention, and intention upon the mind and brain. At this point, I suspect we are only scratching the surface of how the brain, mind, and interpersonal relationships interact and influence the sense of inner knowing. When it comes to the study of consciousness, we are like the early Greek cartographers of the heavens; we are just beginning to explore this challenging and exciting field. This is especially true as we start to experience the separate sense of self softening and dissolving, and love, compassion, and wisdom flowering in its place.

Attachment Theory: How We Bond

Even though the spark of self-knowing lies deep within all of us, not all of us find it easy to trust and value ourselves. Having an attentive and attuned caretaker early in our lives helps enormously. We are multidimensional beings, and attunement can happen on multiple levels— physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Unless these levels are mirrored back to us in some way when we are young, it is harder for us to see and value them in ourselves as adults. Children need to *feel* that they are being seen, heard, and cared for. They need to *feel felt* by another.

When this early mirroring is highly distorted, it is as if we are continually viewing ourselves in one of those carnival fun-house mirrors. It is impossible to get an accurate sense of ourselves, much less trust ourselves. When we do receive sufficient attunement, the flame of self-trust and self-value naturally springs from a native ember and begins to blaze on its own. We are then better able to listen to and trust ourselves and navigate our lives with a growing degree of confidence and autonomy.

Infants are hardwired to connect with their caretakers. They are able to distinguish their mother's face and voice from others within thirty-six hours of birth. They also demonstrate a clear preference for and recognition of their mother's language early on, even when that language is spoken by others. This capacity for early mutual signal recognition has deep evolutionary roots. Bonding ensures survival. There is a remarkable scene in the 2005 documentary film *The March*

of the Penguins that illustrates this. After months of being warmed and protected from the freezing Antarctic winter (mostly by the fathers, interestingly), penguin chicks hatch within a flock of thousands of adult birds, and both parents and chicks are able to recognize each other's voices within a deafening din of bird sound.

Babies need attuned attention—a caretaker who recognizes and actively responds to the baby's feelings and needs. The *quality* of the caretaker's attention is much more important than the *quantity* of time she or he spends with the baby. When normally responsive mothers face their one-year-old babies without showing any emotion on their faces, babies start to have an emotional meltdown within a minute as their attempts to elicit a response meet with failure. Babies look at faces so intently because they are tracking the feelings that our faces subtly express. Those wide-open eyes that are radiating baby *darshan* (a Sanskrit word referring to the benevolent radiance of a saint or sage) and the wonder of being are also looking for emotional attunement.

The mother's emotional responses need to be in sync with the baby's needs and feelings. Studies have shown that babies quickly become upset when viewing a prerecorded video of their mother's smiling face, yet the babies become content when they watch her face on a monitor where she can view and respond to her baby in real time. My wife and I have a delightful home video of our then four-month-old son experimenting with a series of coos and gurgles as my wife precisely mirrors back each sound. It is an amazing and very amusing duet! It also touches the heart in a deep way to witness such a beautiful and sonorous attunement.

Early emotional attunement and bonding have enormous consequences throughout our lives. As adults, we continue to enjoy and benefit from the fine-tuned mirroring of others, no matter how much we stand on our own. This is why having an empathically attuned friend, partner, or therapist can be valuable as we learn to attune to our inner knowing as adults. When we haven't received this type of attunement from our caretakers as children, we unknowingly crave it as adults and desperately search for it—usually in all the wrong places, as David did. We often pick partners who resemble our unavailable parent and try to win them over to prove our value to ourselves. Sadly, someone who

is too available, too loving, just won't fill the bill. We don't value love unless it is hard won from an unavailable partner. Ultimately, no one else can completely fulfill us; self-love remains an inside job.

The field of psychotherapy has been strongly influenced in the past two decades by the growing body of research into what is called attachment theory—the study of how young children bond or fail to bond with their primary caretakers. These early ways of connecting and disconnecting with our parents have profound and pervasive effects upon our way of relating to others throughout our lives.

Building upon the earlier work of John Bowlby, MD, developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth, PhD, initially described three types of childhood attachment styles: (1) secure, (2) ambivalent/resistant, and (3) avoidant.¹ A final style, disorganized, was added later.

A *secure* childhood attachment is linked with a parenting style that is prompt, appropriate, and consistent. Children raised this way experience their caretaker as a secure base from which they can explore the world. Parents who are inconsistently responsive generate insecure and *ambivalent* children, who are generally anxious and preoccupied with their caretaker's availability; these children both fear separation and warm slowly to reconnection. A child with an *avoidant* attachment style has been largely neglected by her primary caregiver and shows little feeling toward others. She has given up on connecting with others and feels low self-worth. Children frequently develop *disorganized* attachment styles when they have been mistreated and abused. They may try to soothe themselves by rocking their bodies or may become physically rigid or frozen in the face of danger.

You may want to take a little time right now to reflect on your experience of bonding when you were raised. Mary Main, PhD, a student of Ainsworth and a research psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, developed the Adult Attachment Interview, which uses a series of open-ended questions to help parents assess their own experience of attachment as children.² Here is an abbreviated version offered by Daniel Siegel, MD, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine.³ Take a few minutes to ponder each of these inquiries and then take some notes.

Think of five words that reflect your earliest recollection of your childhood relationship with your mother.

Then think of an example for each word that illustrates a memory or experience that supports the word.

Now do the same exercise for your father, and for anyone else who was an attachment figure for you in your life (a grandparent, nanny, neighbor, older sibling).

Who were you closest to and why?

What was it like the first time you were separated from your parents or other caregivers?

What was it like for you, and for them, during this separation?

What would you do when you were upset?

If you were sick, injured, or emotionally distressed, what would happen?

Were you ever terrified of your caregivers?

How did your relationship with them change over the years?

Did anyone die during your childhood, or more recently?

Did anyone you were close to leave your life?

How were those losses for you, and how did they impact the family?

Are you close with your caregivers now?

Why do you think they acted as they did?

How did all of these things we've been exploring in these questions influence your growth as an adult?

After considering these questions, what patterns do you detect in your way of relating to others? Which of the four attachment styles seems to best describe how you bond or resist bonding with others? Has your style changed with self-knowledge and experience?

The four styles of attachment have been repeatedly tested and verified using a method called “The Strange Situation,” where one-year-olds are carefully observed as they are exposed to parents and strangers coming and going from a room during a twenty-minute period. (Some of my clients experience their whole lives as “a strange situation.”) The results largely hold true across different cultures. Each of these early childhood adaptive styles becomes a powerful template and predictor for relationship styles in adolescence and adulthood. The correspondence is not perfect, but these childhood styles strongly influence how people relate to others as they grow older. The meaning is clear: children who feel safe and attuned to tend to thrive socially.

The research on attachment theory clearly shows how important being attuned to by others is in attuning with ourselves. We first discover ourselves through the connection with and subtle mirroring of others. When we are listened to, we learn to listen to ourselves. When we are felt, we learn to recognize and value our feelings. When this attunement is absent or lacking, we become a stranger to ourselves, distant by degrees from our own direct experience. If our core needs and feelings are ignored or devalued, we learn to suppress them. It is simply too painful and unsettling to stay open. One result is that we stop feeling and sensing the interior of our bodies. Our deeper sensitivity is buried for safekeeping and then forgotten. This creates a barrier to our inner knowing.

It is also important to recognize that no amount of secure attachment with a primary caretaker can address our existential anxiety as an apparent separate self who will become disabled and die. Only a deeply experiential inquiry into our true nature can address this fear. Our *most* secure base is revealed when we discover who we really are.

Emotional Resonance

The experience of *emotional resonance* is familiar to almost everyone. We can sometimes immediately sense what others are feeling, as if emotions are contagious. Great actors excel at evoking them; consider the exquisite artistry of Meryl Streep. The grief and joy of others can touch us deeply, sometimes overwhelmingly, and we can tell when someone is in a cheerful or depressed mood. I can often sense how my clients are doing before they say a word. How does this happen?

The Early Theory of Limbic Resonance

At the beginning of this century, three psychiatry professors at the University of California, San Francisco, Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, proposed the concept of *limbic resonance* in their popular and beautifully written book *The General Theory of Love* (2000) as a way to understand the deep emotional bonds that all mammals, especially humans, form.

They based their approach upon the triune brain model developed by the American neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean, MD, who in the 1960s proposed three distinct evolutionary layers of the brain: reptilian, limbic (paleomammalian), and neocortex.⁴ According to MacLean, the middle or limbic brain governs emotions, which developed as a result of mammals giving birth to and caring for their babies, something reptiles never do. (Neuroscientists now consider the triune model of the brain to be oversimplified, despite its enduring popularity in the public mind. It turns out that the brain is not as discretely divided in either its form or its function as MacLean initially believed.)

According to the authors of *The General Theory of Love*, the limbic brain specializes in reading the inner states of other mammals and facilitating mutual attunement and a sense of communal connection. The limbic resonance between parent and child creates a *limbic regulation* in the child. Children cannot regulate their bodies or emotions for the first few years of their lives; instead, they rely on their parents for such regulation. Children's nervous systems and chemistry synchronize with those of their parents; for example, an infant's breathing and heart rate will entrain with her mother's when they sleep together. This limbic resonance with their parents teaches children to self-regulate physically and emotionally. If children do not receive the parental care needed to achieve limbic regulation, and thus do not learn how to regulate themselves, working with an empathic psychotherapist as an adult, regardless of his or her theoretical orientation, can create *limbic revision*.

Despite its popular appeal, the theory of limbic resonance has not generated much research or support in the scientific community since it was first proposed. While the theory was on the right track by accentuating the role of the limbic system in mediating emotional connections between people, it lacked precision and was quickly supplanted by the discovery of mirror neurons.

Mirror Neurons, Embodied Simulation, and Empathy

The adult brain weighs about three pounds and contains around one hundred billion neurons, or nerve cells. Neurons exist for the sake of all of the other cells in the body. They monitor internal states and interactions with the environment in order to maintain homeostasis, or balance. We experience our neurons' messages firsthand whenever we feel thirsty and cold. When we drink water or put on layers of clothing, we are responding to our neurons' signals to hydrate our cells or regulate our body temperature. According to Antonio Damasio, MD, PhD, a highly respected author, researcher, and professor of neuroscience at the University of Southern California, networks of neurons even mimic the body's structure and create an actual map of the body, a kind of "neural double."