

# AWAKE WHERE YOU ARE



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The Art of Embodied Awareness



Martin Aylward



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# Introduction

## A Journey to Inner Space

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Slow down, you move too fast  
You got to make the morning last

—SIMON AND GARFUNKEL, “The 59th Street Bridge  
Song (Feelin’ Groovy)”

In the thirty years since I sat my first meditation retreat, beginning the journey of contemplative practice that has defined my whole adult life, I’ve seen the interest in meditation flourish and grow incredibly in Europe, where I live, and in the United States where I often teach. Interest in meeting and navigating inner experience more skillfully has grown hugely, popularized through secular mindfulness programs as well as Buddhist silent retreats. Encouragingly for both our personal and cultural evolution, more and more people find the need, the wish, and, crucially, the *commitment* to train their minds and free their hearts.

Meditation is an intimate engagement with our lives, not something to *do*—it is a deep familiarization with experience, irreducible to a mere technique. All the talk of *mind-training* and *mindfulness* can make meditation sound a bit, well, mind-y—which is to say, a bit mental! All the language and descriptions of “working with the mind” can exacerbate our already chronic tendency to mentalize or abstract our experience, whereas we really

need to gather our attention into our immediate, visceral, *somatic* experience—into this sensory body where all experience is actually happening.

This book will lead you into the whole body of your life using embodied *presence* (the meditative quality we commonly call “mindfulness,” but which we might think of here, more as “body-fulness”). However much you train your mind, meditation has to be a visceral process more than a mental exercise—if it is not grounded in the body, then there is no integration. If you are not *here*, you are lost.

Each chapter addresses some feature of this body-ful practice. Taken together, they unpack and explore Buddha’s exquisite yet initially mysterious statement that *the whole universe arises and passes right here in this body*. From our sensory experience, through our instinctual drives to our mental processing, emotional reactivity, and relational patterns, we’ll explore how to live more freely and love more fully—how to *inhabit* your body and your life.

This book is not another in the burgeoning collection on “how to meditate.” It is a guidebook for an embodied life—an invitation to be with yourself under the microscope of meditative awareness, to meet life up close and close in—to settle into the visceral theater of *here-ness*, right where your life is playing out.

We’ll also explore all the habitual obstacles to this process: the demands upon, defenses against, and distractions from our immediate, sensory life. We will examine our busyness—our screens and devices—our overly goal-oriented lives, our reliance on stimulation and entertainment, consumption and comfort—our myriad strategies of avoiding ourselves—of going *up and out* into unnecessary and unhelpful drama and disconnection.

This book will consistently invite you *in and down*—back into embodied presence. Intentionally, *attentionally* inhabiting your felt experience takes you “under your skin,” beneath the descriptions, interpretations, and reactions that usually clutter the mind. Deeply embodied meditative practice is utterly transformative, beyond the prosaic vision of some mindfulness approaches—beyond

stress management, beyond better sleep and being more “in the moment”—to a vision and a real possibility of a liberated life.

I’ve tried to write in the way I teach, in which I always have two aims. First, I want to meet you, the reader, right where you are—referencing experiences you recognize, situations you find yourself in—patterns that are all too familiarly human and ordinary, the stuff of your everyday life and mind. Second—and I know it sounds contradictory to the first point, but that is the delicate art of teaching—I want to simultaneously point you *beyond* (possibly *unimaginably beyond*) where you already are. The teachings and practices I offer, and which in turn were offered to me by my own teachers, point to a totally free human existence—free of reactivity, free of fear, free of pettiness—free to live, love, and *know* your freeness of being, unshakably. If you explore only what you already know, you end up reinforcing your own mental content. If I only point you beyond where you are, then transcendence becomes avoidance, or *spiritual bypassing*. Real transformative work happens when you do both simultaneously. You meet yourself in order to see right through *you*—and you explore your material in order to drop it.

My aim, then, is to lead you into your own life—right in, into your physical body where it all happens—into an intimacy you may have tasted occasionally or maybe have never known—into a quality of listening instead of knowing, of sensing rather than reacting—into the embrace of the whole universe, which is unfolding *here*, in this very body.

Sense yourself sitting here, just for a moment.

The feel of your feet and legs.

The gentle movement of your breathing.

Come inside, and let’s explore together.



# 1

## This Human Body

---

Who feels it knows it, Lord.

—BOB MARLEY

### THE HUMAN CONDITION

Life is unreliable. Pain is unavoidable. All we accumulate we will lose, and all those we love will disappoint us and disappear from our lives—if we don't go first. We have a frustrating lack of control over what experience comes our way and how we react to it. It is not easy, this human life.

And yet we feel it should be easier.

We succumb to the delusion that others have it easy, imagining our friends or colleagues have somehow figured things out that we haven't. I so well remember feeling insecure or confused and that I should be different. As if my life could be perfect, if only *I* could be perfect. (No pressure!) And of course, nobody anywhere has ever managed that—and yet we keep on trying as if it were possible, exhausting ourselves in the process.

Recognizing this truth is quite relieving. All the while I imagine I should have it all figured out, that I ought to be more successful, more attractive, or more intelligent, I can't help but feel there is something wrong with me. And then of course, there must be someone to blame. Surely it is someone's fault that my life doesn't

correspond to my idealized version of it. (My fault? My parents? God's? Those are, after all, the usual suspects). But human life is complex and unpredictable. When we see that life cannot possibly meet our exact wishes and preferences, we relax. We begin to forgive our human frailties and failings and to treat ourselves more gently.

We allow ourselves to be less than perfect.

In this relief, we find that imperfection is completely natural—that it is the inherent nature of having a human life. We move from reaching for perfection, to bathing in the relief at imperfection. The chef at Moulin de Chaves, the meditation retreat center where I live and teach in Southwest France, once wrote on the fridge door, quoting me from a teaching I had just given, “Freedom of being is the absence of anxiety about imperfection.” She thought it was a wipeable marker, but it turned out to be indelible ink and lasted several years. Eventually however, even “permanent” ink succumbs to the infallibility of impermanence.

### LOST IN THOUGHT

A journalist visiting the monastery of my early teacher Ajahn Buddhadasa asked him how he would describe the state of humanity. Ajahn's reply was, “Lost in thought.”

That is the default condition for most of us, most of the time. Like James Joyce's Mr. Duffy, who “lived a short distance from his body,” we are caught up in abstraction, reaction, and interpretation—lost in ideas rather than immersed in life's immediacy. We tell ourselves and each other stories about our experience (increasingly documented on Instagram or Facebook) rather than really inhabiting it. We are tense in ways we barely notice—leaving ourselves and losing ourselves until we don't know any different.

Embodied awareness is the way back home—intimacy with where and how we are right now, with what is happening and how we are meeting it. Ease and intimacy with ourselves is not only possible, it is our most natural state. Yet having spent decades developing our inner discourse, we find ourselves quite attached to it. We could

blame our habitually distracted state on “modern life,” and maybe particularly on the internet and the screens that increasingly fill both our work lives and leisure time. We could speculate about how disembodiment is a byproduct of increasingly urban lives and our subsequent estrangement from the natural world. But disconnection is nothing new. The habit of losing ourselves in drama and detail is as old as humanity, developing as language and culture developed, growing as the very human capacity for thought and abstraction itself grew.

We are *Homo sapiens sapiens*, beings that know that we know, that can not only experience life, but also describe our experience, refer to our experience—and abstract our experience.

So how do you come back to yourself and be at home in your experience? How do you meet the world without leaving yourself?

### RELAX . . . AND BE ATTENTIVE

More than twenty-five centuries ago, Buddha was already pointing at how we get lost in thought and inviting us to come back. After years of ascetic practices, trying to “transcend” his body but weakening and abusing it in the process, he changed his approach after remembering resting in the shade of a tree as a teenager. He recalled both the ease and relaxation of being at home in his own skin and the alertness as he let his surroundings meet his senses. These two qualities woke him up to this essence of skillful attention: relaxing into bodily experience and being attentive to what arises.

Most of the ways we know to relax involve some way of going unconscious (having a drink, watching TV, taking a nap). And most ways we know how to focus or concentrate involve some sense of strain. We furrow our brow, screw up our face, concentrate “hard” on something we are doing. Relaxation and focus seem like opposites—if we relax, we are unfocused. If we focus, we are not relaxed.

Yet relaxation and focus can (and in meditative awareness need to) go together. In sports we call it being “in the zone.” There is

something deeply compelling about watching an athlete who is both totally committed and absorbed, yet also relaxed, graceful, effortless. Roger Federer is an exquisite example. Skilled musicians also show us this, focused on the melody, the rhythm, the technique, while also completely absorbed in the mood and pleasure of the music.

Sports and music show us the possibility of simultaneous relaxation and focus. Meditative awareness, though, differs in several important ways.

First, there is neither action nor goal into which these qualities are poured. In meditation we relax into and focus on simply being here—on what arises naturally rather than on what we are doing or creating. There is nothing to accomplish, nothing that should happen. We are entering into what *is* without trying to get anywhere. Hence the classic meditation adage: Nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to be.

Second, athletes and musicians' attention is being held by strong stimuli (the running, the tennis match, the song being sung or played). Intensity attracts attention easily (people at the movies have no trouble sitting down and focusing for a couple of hours). But in meditation we are entering into the most ordinary and un compelling elements of experience—the breathing body, sensations, and sounds. Attending to these nonstimulating elements trains the attention: it becomes steadier, subtler, more penetrating.

A third difference is that we are exploring experience for the purpose of wisdom. We meditate to be awake to the nature of experience, to see reality clearly, to understand ourselves and life in a way that is freeing. This makes meditation distinctly different from other absorbing activities. Some will say "Dance is my meditation," or "Painting is my meditation, because I get absorbed in it. I forget myself and feel one with the music, the painting, the world." That is beautiful—but it is not transformational meditation. The main feature of a transformational meditative practice is not to attain an absorption state—the main feature is wisdom. We meet experience deeply not just to feel it, but to understand our relationship to it,



and in doing so to let go of the drama and tension we habitually create.

Most of us are so used to holding certain tension patterns that we don't notice them. A friend of mine was giving someone a massage, and when she lifted the person's arm, it just stayed there, stiffly. "Relax," she said. "I am relaxed," he replied (stiffly!). "What about your arm?" she asked. And then, of course, he could feel it and soften the muscles there. When attention goes somewhere, then we notice. Once we feel and understand the tension, we can soften it.

Check in right now as you are reading this.

How are the muscles in your face? Your shoulders?

If there are tensions, see if they can soften. And as you continue reading, see if you can do so while continuing to sense into bodily life.

In meditation, relaxation and focus support and enhance each other. The more we focus, the more we feel tensions and can relax them. The more we relax, the more conscious we are, and the more we notice. We become aware of subtle tensions and can let them soften, deepening the relaxation and the depth of contact with our experience, which in turn allows us to find other "nonrelaxed" zones. As well as muscular tensions we start to find energetic knots, psychological blockages, emotional holding, and more. There seems to be literally no limit to our capacity to both focus and relax. And our bodily experience is the ground for this whole exploration.

Cultivating both focus and relaxation, we meet experience more fully. We start to taste the truth of one of my favorite statements of the Buddha, one which in some ways gives us the thread and flow of this whole book:

The entire universe  
arises and passes  
right here  
in this body.

## EMBODIED ATTENTION

How important, then, that we learn to be right here, in this body! If the whole universe is showing up right here, what a tragedy if I keep missing it through the endless involvement in my own drama. Embodied awareness is the essence of meditation. Body and consciousness cannot be separated—a human body is a conscious body. Take the consciousness away and you have . . . a corpse, a lump of rotting flesh. No consciousness, no body.

If you want to be really at home in your skin, you have to embody your experience. Listening not only with your ears but with your whole being, with your cells. Listening to your sensory life closely, with care, as if to a new language—one of sensation, energy, density and space, mood and feeling, tension and relaxation.

What might that be like, right now? Reading these pages, what is it like to be sitting here? Let your attention drop for a moment into the felt sense of your experience, just as it is. Feel your lower body, and the density of sensation caused by the pressure of your buttocks and thighs on the seat, the cushion, chair, or floor.

Take your time with this. Relax into it. Feel along your arms. Feel your hands holding this book. How much tension is required to keep holding it? Obviously some, or it will drop from your grip. But are there any extra, unnecessary tensions involved? Some habitual tendency to hold yourself a little more tightly than necessary? To draw yourself into the familiar knot of self? And if so, might it soften, even a little?

Can you taste the softening? Feel the ease of letting unnecessary tension drop? Can you let focus and relaxation come together, right now? Sensing your experience, feeling what it is like—letting yourself relax.

What about your face? We often hold tension around the eyes or in the jaw. As you explore, feel from the inside. Invite everything to relax, but without demanding, without expecting any particular result.

See if you can settle a little more fully into the felt experience of sitting here, reading these words, meeting life from inside experience.

### INSIDE EXPERIENCE

In the old Buddhist texts, evocative language points us clearly into the intimacy of meditative awareness. The texts distinguish clearly between embodied (*yoniso*) and disembodied (*ayoniso*) attention (*manisikara*).

If you are familiar with yogic tradition and language, you may recognize *yonī*\* as meaning “vagina,” though here it more precisely means “womb.” Embodied attention, then, is literally “from the womb”—that is, grounded down in the lower belly. While mostly our attention is disembodied, disconnected, cut off from the visceral immediacy of our lives, here we are asked to inhabit our center of gravity, to be awake in our womb. Those without the certain female organs may be feeling left out here, but we are talking about an energetic womb, not a biological one—felt as the deepest place in us. The womb is the source of life both literally (we all come directly from the womb) and energetically; this is the center of embodied, or we might say *em-bellied*, attention.

A woman of about thirty-five, a successful academic with a busy mind, was on retreat with me recently. We explored together how she could drop her attention down into her lower body, using her breathing to settle her attention in her abdomen. Initially she felt nothing, and so I encouraged her to rest her hands gently over her belly as she sat, the touch provoking some warm sensation there. As the retreat progressed, she began to feel a deep presence in her womb. Unfamiliar with what she called “my womb speaking to me,” she thought this must be a hitherto repressed longing for children welling up in her, but as she stayed with it, she realized her belly was energetically “coming to life.” For the first time, she was able to be present right inside her physical experience. She began to feel

\* In Sanskrit, *yonī* can be used in reference to any part of the female reproductive system.

a powerful sense of confidence, which could be seen in how she stood taller and walked more gracefully. She was starting to inhabit her body, to lead with her belly, to experience life without leaving herself.

### DON'T "BE MINDFUL OF . . ."

Meditation is pretty mainstream these days. Mindfulness in particular has made various practices and teachings widely accessible, and many people have become familiar with "watching the breath," "observing sensation," and "being mindful of" moment-by-moment experience. Words like *mind*, *attention*, *consciousness*, *mindfulness* even, have disembodied connotations and can reinforce an overly mentalized way of practicing: I "observe" my experience as if from a distance. If I am "watching" my breath, then I am outside of it. If I am "mindful of" experience, then who or what is standing outside the experience to be mindful? The language reinforces the sense of a predominantly mental discipline. Maybe this is inevitable. We are indeed training our minds through directing our attention and exploring our consciousness, but we need to dissolve that gap between observer and observed, seer and seen. We need to bring our attention in and down, countering our usual habit of going up and out.

The old texts reveal how crucial is this embodied approach to a successful meditation practice. The more-or-less standard translation for the Pali *sati* is "mindfulness." It is way too late now to try and change that, but personally I find that translation a little clumsy. Only slightly tongue-in-cheek, I might propose for this book that we think of it more as "body-fullness"! I personally prefer the term "presence," which is both etymologically closer (*sati* literally means to recall or gather one's attention, to remember where one is, to be present in the midst of one's experience). Importantly, there is no equivalent in the texts to "being mindful of" what is happening. The grammar is such that one either "enters into" or "establishes oneself in" *sati* (presence, mindfulness).

How might that affect the way you practice? Trying to be “mindful of” my experience, I remain “the watcher,” the one being mindful. I abstract myself from the experience. What if we abandoned this tiresome watcher, controller, and commentator? What if, right now, you don’t try to *be mindful of* what is happening? Instead, enter into experience. Feel your way into what is happening rather than trying to observe it from the position of a watcher. When I give meditation instructions, I use language that encourages people to be intimate with, to sense into, to inhabit experience—all ways of expressing a “knowing from the inside,” another important phrase from the traditional texts.

The fundamentals of Buddhist meditation come from the Mahasatipatthana Sutta (The Greater Discourse on Establishing Presence). In it, Buddha outlines in great depth and detail the four specific areas of experience to contemplate:

- *Kayanupassana*—bodily experience
- *Vedanānupassana*—the feel or tone of experience (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral)
- *Cittānupassana*—the momentary coloring of mental/emotional experience
- *Dhammanupassana*—the nature of experience

The four areas build on each other. We don’t move from bodily experience to some other aspect. We establish presence in bodily experience, as the foundation for meeting all experience. Or said another way, all experience is embodied experience. This is underlined by the recurring encouragement through all four aspects, repeated at the end of every section, to know experience from the inside. Knowing bodily experience *not* through an idea or image of “my body, this body”—but knowing the body in the body, knowing the breathing in the breathing, the feel of the experience inside the experience. This clear emphasis is the ground of embodied practice—as such I’ll encourage you again and again to feel into

where you are, to sense into your experience as it is. Because this is how a genuinely alive, embodied practice will develop.

This is how embodied wisdom will grow and flourish.

This is how you'll find ease and spaciousness in being right where you are.

## EMBODIED PRESENCE

Fully inhabiting experience, you notice when tensions or reactivity arise and can meet them without overreaching into unnecessary drama. Embodied presence feels relaxed and open, easily contented. I learned this by example from my teachers.

In 1990, shortly after discovering and engaging with Buddhist practices, I met a Himalayan hermit called Sukhanta Giri, whom most people called simply Babaji. I was nineteen years old. I had come to India with a one-way ticket and no luggage, searching for depth and meaning, inspired by images and fantasies of mystical India, driven by adolescent wanderlust and existential angst.

I had just completed a ten-day meditation course in Dharamsala, the Himalayan hill town in Northern India that is home to the His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. The teachings and practices during the course affected me profoundly, and about twenty minutes into the first teachings on the first evening, in a moment of great exhilaration, I felt clearly that I had spent my whole life looking for these teachings. Here was a way to explore consciousness—a way to wake up to my habits and beliefs, to get out of my own way and let life in! Here was a way to align with generations of other people who had also felt restless and dissatisfied with the usual conventions of education-career-marriage-retirement-death, a way to train my mind and free my heart, to wake up and live more fully, more fluidly, more freely.

It was like finding water in the desert, and at the end of the course, I resolved to make like a yogi and find a cave. That was the real way to meditate, right? I had no blanket, and I had no cookstove or pot. I didn't know how I was going to eat or keep

warm. But I did know that serious yogis went into the mountains, so while terrified at the thought, I set off the day after the retreat in search of my “cave in the snow,” or at least in the forest beneath the snow line.

To simplify a somewhat melodramatic story, I never made it to the cave. I bumped into an old sadhu (Hindu renunciate) on the road out of town, a man whom I had met and spent time with some months previously in the Rajasthan desert a thousand kilometers away. We greeted each other and he asked me where I was headed.

“To a cave, to meditate,” I replied, grandiosely. In testament to his great compassion, I don’t think he actually rolled his eyes. I like to think he appreciated my youthful enthusiasm, though also no doubt saw its folly. He himself had come to India from Fiji at nineteen and had never gone back again. He carried a long white stick with many pieces of cloth tied to it, and when I had once asked him what they were for, he replied, “Each one is a telephone number for God. I keep on dialing, dialing. Any moment—God answer!”

Shaking his head paternally, Fiji Baba told me not to go in search of a cave. He instead pointed me up the hill and across the river, into a small valley where he said one “Bengali Baba” was living, who had a hut and kept a *dhuni*, the fireplace that sadhus keep as part of their practice, and would probably let me stay. He wrote me a note of introduction in Hindi, probably “Please look after this poor deluded boy”—and I followed his directions through a beautiful cedar-scented forest valley to a small orange gate with the *AUM* sign written above. I found Babaji sitting at his fireplace, greeted him with palms together, and handed him the note. He nodded, pointed to a bare room, and said I could stay three days. I put down my small bag—and spent most of the next three years there with him.

Babaji and I didn’t converse so much. His English was limited and my Hindi was still poor at the time. He encouraged me to develop and deepen the meditation practice I had already started. We sat by the fire together, worked in the garden, fetched firewood.

He cooked and I washed the dishes. Others came and went, staying

shorter or longer times. People often ask what he taught me. I reply that he didn't teach anything, but that I learned much.

Truly, Babaji didn't teach anything—but he gave a gentle, gracious, and generous attention to each gesture he made, every task he undertook, everyone he received at the ashram. The way he unscrewed the tea jar was a teaching. How he kneaded chapati dough and turned the wood in the fire—the way he washed the spinach, checked the rice for stones, fed leftovers to the local dogs—all these things communicated a quality of presence, of care, of intimacy with life. The way he listened, the way he laughed, the way he scolded villagers who came to settle disputes—correcting, advising and admonishing them without ever belittling or shaming them.

Babaji didn't teach me anything, but he showed me how to attend to experience. My Buddhist teachers told me how to meditate, but Babaji showed me how to live. My Buddhist teachers taught me about mindfulness; Babaji showed me what presence was. And what he showed me, most of all, was that it was possible. That presence wasn't something to "attain"—some exalted plateau to reach. That it didn't depend on some particular depth of meditation or some special experience, but simply on the quality of attention, moment by moment. An attention that is intimate, generous, relaxed—in short: embodied.

### WINDOWS CAN PAINT THEMSELVES

One time I decided to repaint the ashram windows. I took a bus to town and bought paint, brushes, sandpaper. The old red paint was sun-bleached, dull, and peeling, and I worked eagerly, excited by the twin expectations of shining new windows and my teacher's approval.

Babaji shook his head. "Your problem" he said, "is that you're busy painting the windows." Er, yes. That's the idea. But what he was inviting me to do was to come back to myself. To return to the immediacy of the painting itself and to give up straining for the result. My task, I found, was not to paint the windows, but rather to see the wood. To feel the brush in my hand. To notice when I started



to get ahead of myself and to come back. To simply take care of each brushstroke. And in that way, as Babaji said, "the windows can paint themselves."

It's a bit like that, writing this book. My very kind and extremely patient publishers have been encouraging me for a few years, but I could neither find the time nor the real motivation for a while. Now that I have finally signed a contract and committed to it, writing a whole book seems way too daunting. But of course, that is not my task. I just need to take care of this section, find a way to express what I want to right here. And sure enough (at least this is what I'm counting on with about 20 percent written so far), eventually, the book will have written itself.

### DON'T LEAVE YOURSELF

Ajahn Mun, another famous Thai meditation master, used to give the instruction, "Never let your mind leave your body." If that seems too much to ask, then how about this: every time you notice that your mind has left your body really notice that. Notice that feeling of being "up and out" of yourself, of being caught in some abstraction. Sense into the inevitable tensions that have arisen through your attention having been hijacked . . . and let it all go. You return by coming "in and down," by re-embodiment your experience.

Where is your attention now? It might well be "up and out" on the page you are reading. That's what we do. We feel that to connect to something, we need to go "out there" to it. But fundamentally, there is no "out there." The book, the page, the reading, the understanding (hopefully)—it's all here. Here in awareness. Here in experience. So again (and don't worry about the repetition, you'll need to do this several billion times), how about coming in and down? It is counterintuitive to a mind (your mind, my mind, everyone's mind) that has been conditioned to go out to meet experience, but actually, you don't need to go anywhere. Ever.

Come in and down. Feel your arms and legs. The weight of your legs on your seat. Stay where you are. Settle into your direct, visceral

experience. And notice that you can still see “the world around you.” That you can still read these words. You can let the world come to you instead of going after it. You can let experience rise up to meet you where you are, instead of losing yourself in its pursuit.

### YOU ARE ALREADY HERE

When we first start really noticing, it’s astonishing to see where the mind goes—how often and how compellingly we’re caught up in all kinds of stuff and how so much of it is basically just rubbish. Like an automatic content-generator, we spew forth an endless stream of habit-formed thinking: partial recollections of what has happened previously, vague anticipations of what we hope or fear will happen next, habitual commentary on what is happening now. It can seem impossibly difficult, like it would take an unimaginable amount of mindfulness, to be constantly present in the face of all those pulls on our attention.

But practice nevertheless, and you’ll notice something crucially important: It is *not* being present that is such hard work, it is all the departures—the endless demands, defenses, and distractions—that take so much energy. We are so habituated to all this mental activity, that it feels normal. But if every time you notice that your attention has gone off somewhere, you sense what is happening in your body, you’ll start to notice the subtle tensions of leaning out of yourself. You’ll feel how being lost in thought is inherently stressful as you recognize the inevitable physical tension of fabricating, feeding, and then reacting to whatever stimuli you’ve gotten involved with. And then you’ll see that you return to presence not by an act of will, not by forcing your attention back to some elusive “present moment,” but by recognizing and releasing these tensions. Returning to presence, in other words, is mostly and most simply about relaxing.

Life’s immediacy is way more powerful than all your little fixations. However deep you go down the rabbit hole of your own thinking, sooner or later life wakes you up to the fact that you are *here*. One student memorably noticed this when he was trying so

hard to be present, trying to let go of all his thoughts and come back to his breath, and feeling increasingly tired and frustrated. Eventually, it was all too much and he just gave up. He opened his eyes, watching the raindrops run down the nearby window. And like the Buddha's recollection of lying under the tree, he realized that he was here. Aware. Watching raindrops instead of breaths, but at the same time present in his body. It was suddenly obvious that he didn't need to *do anything* to be here.

Do you need to do anything right now, to be here? Wherever you direct your attention, here is your experience. You can see, and know you are seeing. Breathe, and feel you are breathing. Read and understand these words, and be inside the experience as it is happening.

You don't *do* awareness. Instead of the effort to be present, there is effortless presence every time you relax your contracted, fixated attention.

With some sincerity and commitment (called practice), this can become your consistent, near constant home.