

KOSMOS

The Journal for Global Citizens Creating the New Civilization



fall | winter 2012
\$10 US | \$11 Canada

REFLECTIVE APPROACHES TO SOCIAL ACTIVISM
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Embodied Spirituality, Now and Then

by Jorge N. Ferrer

The Living Body

Embodied spirituality regards the body as subject, as the home of the complete human being, as a source of spiritual insight, as a microcosm of the universe and the Mystery, and as pivotal for enduring spiritual transformation.

Body as subject: To see the body as subject means to approach it as a living world, with all its interiority and depth, its needs and desires, its lights and shadows, its wisdom and obscurities. Bodily joys and sorrows, tensions and relaxations, longings and repulsions are some of the means through which the body can speak to us. By any measure, the body is not an 'It' to be objectified and used for the goals or even spiritual ecstasies of the conscious mind, but a 'Thou,' an intimate partner with whom the other human dimensions can collaborate in the pursuit of ever-increasing forms of liberating wisdom.

Body as the home of the complete human being: In this physical reality in which we live, the body is our home, a locus of freedom that allows us to walk our own unique path, both literally and symbolically. Once we fully overcome the dualism between matter and Spirit, the body can no longer be seen as a 'prison of the soul' or even as a 'temple of Spirit.' The mystery of incarnation never alluded to the 'entrance' of Spirit into the body, but to its 'becoming' flesh: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh." Would it then perhaps be more accurate to appreciate our bodies as a transmutation of Spirit into fleshy form at least during our physical existence? Through the ongoing incarnation of innumerable beings, life may aim at the ultimate union of humanity and divinity in the body. Perhaps paradoxically, a complete incarnation can bring a peaceful and fulfilling death because we can then depart from this material existence with a profoundly felt sense of having accomplished one of the most essential purposes in being born into the world.

Body as source of spiritual insight: The body is a divine revelation that can offer spiritual understanding, discrimination and wisdom. First, the body is the uterus for the conception and gestation of genuine spiritual knowledge. Bodily sensations, for example, are foundational stepping-stones in the embodied transformation of Spirit's creative energies through each human life. In the absence of severe blockages or dissociations, this

creative energy is somatically transformed into impulses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, insights, visions, and, ultimately, contemplative revelations. As the Buddha famously said, "Everything that arises in the mind starts flowing with a sensation on the body."

Furthermore, in listening deeply to the body we realize that physical sensations and impulses can also be genuine sources of spiritual insight. In certain Zen schools, for example, bodily actions constitute crucial tests of spiritual realization and are seen as the ultimate verification of sudden illumination, or satori. The epistemological relevance of embodiment in spiritual matters was also passionately asserted by Nikos Kazantzakis:

“. . . the meaning of life is not something to be discerned and known intellectually by the mind, but to be felt in the depths of our flesh.”

Within me even the most metaphysical problem takes on a warm physical body which smells of sea, soil, and human sweat. The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand—when I can smell, see, touch.

Perhaps even more important, the body is the human dimension that can reveal the ultimate meaning of incarnated life. Being physical itself, the body stores within its depths the answer to the mystery of material existence. The body's answer to this conundrum is not given in the form of any grand metaphysical vision or Theory of Everything, but gracefully granted through states of being that render life naturally profound and meaningful. In other words, the meaning of life is not something to be discerned and known intellectually by the mind, but to be felt in the depths of our flesh.

Body as microcosm of the universe and the Mystery: Virtually all spiritual traditions hold that there is a deep resonance among the human being, the cosmos, and the Mystery. This view is captured in the esoteric dictum 'as above so below'; the Platonic, Taoist, Islamic, Kabbalistic and tantric understanding of 'the person as microcosm of the macrocosm;' and the Biblical view of the human being made 'in the image of God' (imago Dei). For the Bauls of Bengal, the understanding of the body as the microcosm of the universe (bhanda/brahmanda) entails the belief that the divine dwells physically within the human body. The Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin put it this way: "My matter is not a part of the Universe that I possess totaliter; it is the totality of the Universe possessed by me partialiter."

All these perceptions portray an image of the human body as mirroring and containing the innermost structure of both the entire



Prisoner practicing asana.

universe and the ultimate creative principle. In a number of traditions, this structural correspondence between the human body and the Mystery shaped mystical practices in which bodily rituals and actions were thought to affect the very dynamics of the Divine—a pursuit that was perhaps most explicitly described in Kabbalistic theurgical mysticism. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the body is to be valued only because it represents or can affect ‘larger’ or ‘higher’ realities. This view subtly retains the fundamental dualism between material body and Spirit. Embodied spirituality recognizes the human body as a pinnacle of Spirit’s creative manifestation and, consequently, as overflowing with intrinsic spiritual meaning.

Body as essential for an enduring spiritual transformation: The body is a filter through which human beings can purify polluted energetic tendencies, both biographical and collectively inherited. Given that the body is denser in nature than the emotional, mental and conscious worlds, changes taking place in it are more lasting and permanent. In other words, an enduring psychospiritual transformation needs to be grounded in somatic transfiguration. The integrative transformation of the somatic/energetic worlds of a person effectively short-circuits the tendency of past energetic habits to return, thus creating a solid foundation for a thorough and permanent spiritual transformation.

Features of Embodied Spirituality

In light of this expanded understanding of the human body, I now offer a consideration of ten features of embodied spirituality:

1. A tendency towards integration: Embodied spirituality is integrative insofar as it seeks to foster the harmonious participation

of all human attributes in the spiritual path without tensions or dissociations. Despite his downplaying the spiritual import of sexuality and the vital world, Sri Aurobindo was correct when he said that a liberation of consciousness *in* consciousness should not be confused with an integral transformation that entails the spiritual alignment of all human dimensions. This recognition suggests the need to expand the traditional Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattva vow—that is, to renounce complete liberation until all sentient beings attain delivery—to encompass an ‘integral bodhisattva vow’ in which the conscious mind renounces full liberation until the body and the primary world can be free as well. Since for most individuals the conscious mind is the seat of their sense of identity, an exclusive liberation of consciousness can be deceptive insofar as we can believe that we are fully free when, in fact, essential dimensions of ourselves are underdeveloped, alienated or in bondage. Needless to say, to embrace an integral bodhisattva vow is not a return to the individualistic spiritual aspirations of early Buddhism because it entails a commitment to the integral liberation of all sentient beings, not only of their conscious minds or conventional sense of identity.

2. Realization through the body: Although their actual practices and fruits remain obscure in the available literature, the Hindu sect of the Bauls of Bengal coined the term *kaya sadhana* to refer to a ‘realization through the body.’ Embodied spirituality explores the development of *kaya sadhanas* appropriate for our contemporary world. With the notable exception of certain tantric techniques, traditional forms of meditation are practiced individually and without bodily interaction with other practitioners. Modern embodied spirituality rescues the spiritual significance not only of the body but also of physical contact. Due to their sequential



Reverse namaste.

emergence in human development—from soma to instinct to heart to mind—each dimension grows by taking root in the previous ones, with the body thereby becoming the natural doorway to the deepest levels of the rest of human dimensions. Therefore, the practice of contemplative physical contact in a context of relational mindfulness and spiritual aspiration can have a profound transformative power.

In order to foster a genuine embodied practice, it is essential to make contact with the body, discern its current state and needs, and then create spaces for the body to engender its own practices and capabilities—devise its own yoga, so to speak. When the body becomes permeable to both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies, it can find its own rhythms, habits, postures, movements and charismatic rituals. Interestingly, some ancient Indian texts state that yoga postures (asanas) first emerged spontaneously from within the body and were guided by the free flow of its vital energy (prana). A creative indwelling spiritual life resides within the body—an intelligent vital dynamism that is waiting to emerge to orchestrate the unfolding of our becoming fully human.

3. *Awakening of the body:* The permeability of the body to immanent and transcendent spiritual energies leads to its gradual awakening. In contrast to meditation techniques that focus on mindfulness of the body, this awakening can be more accurately articulated in terms of ‘bodyfulness.’ In bodyfulness, the psychosomatic organism becomes calmly alert without the intentionality of the conscious mind. Bodyfulness reintegrates in the human being a lost somatic capability that is present in panthers, tigers, and other ‘big cats’ of the jungle, who can be extraordinarily aware without intentionally attempting to be so. A possible further horizon of bodyfulness was described by the Mother, the

spiritual consort of Sri Aurobindo, in terms of the conscious awakening of the very cells of the organism

4. *Resacralization of sexuality and sensuous pleasure:* Whereas our mind and consciousness constitute a natural bridge to transcendent awareness, our body and its primary energies constitute a natural bridge to immanent spiritual life. Immanent life is spiritual prima materia—that is, spiritual energy in a state of transformation, still not actualized, saturated with potentials and possibilities and the source of genuine innovation and creativity at all levels. Sexuality and the vital world are the first soils for the organization and creative development of immanent Spirit in human reality. This is why it is so important that sexuality be lived as a sacred soil free from fears, conflicts or artificial impositions dictated by our minds, cultures or spiritual ideologies. When the vital world is reconnected to immanent spiritual life, the primary drives can spontaneously collaborate in our psychospiritual unfolding without needing to be sublimated or transcended.

Due to its captivating effect on human consciousness and the egoic personality, sensuous pleasure has been viewed with suspicion—or even demonized as inherently sinful—by most religious traditions. In a context of embodied spiritual aspiration, however, it becomes fundamental to rescue, in a non-narcissistic manner, the dignity and spiritual significance of physical pleasure. In the same way that pain ‘contracts’ the body, pleasure ‘relaxes’ it, making it more porous to the presence and flow of both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies. In this light, the formidable magnetic force of the sexual drive can be seen as attracting consciousness to matter, facilitating both its embodiment and grounding in the world and the development of an incarnational process that transforms both the individual and the world.

Furthermore, the recognition of the spiritual import of physical pleasure naturally heals the historical split between sensuous love (eros) and spiritual love (agape), and this integration fosters the emergence of genuinely human love—an unconditional love that is simultaneously embodied and spiritual.

5. *The urge to create:* In *Cosmos and History*, Mircea Eliade (1982) makes a compelling case for the ‘re-enactive’ nature of many religious practices and rituals, for example, in their attempt to replicate cosmogonic actions and events. Expanding this account, we could say that most religious traditions are ‘reproductive’ insofar as their practices aim to not only ritually reenact mythical motives, but also replicate the enlightenment of their founder (e.g., the awakening of the Buddha) or attain the state of salvation or freedom described in allegedly revealed scriptures (e.g., the moksa of the Vedas). Although disagreements about the exact nature of such states and the most effective methods to attain them abounded in the historical development of religious practices and ideas—naturally leading to rich creative developments within the traditions—spiritual inquiry was regulated (and arguably constrained) by such predetermined unequivocal goals.

Embodied spirituality, in contrast, seeks to co-create novel spiritual understandings, practices and expanded states of freedom in interaction with immanent and transcendent sources of Spirit. The creative power of embodied spirituality is connected to its integrative nature. Whereas through our mind and consciousness we tend to access subtle spiritual energies already enacted in history that display more fixed forms and dynamics (e.g., specific cosmological motifs, archetypal configurations, mystical visions and states, etc.), it is our connection to our vital/primary world that gives us access to the generative power of immanent spiritual life. Put simply, the more that all human dimensions actively participate in spiritual knowing, the more creative spiritual life becomes.

Although many variables are clearly at play, the connection between vital/primary energies and spiritual innovation may help to explain, first, why human spirituality and mysticism have been to a great extent ‘conservative’; that is, heretic mystics are the exception to the rule, and most mystics firmly conformed to accepted doctrines and canonical scriptures; and second, why many spiritual traditions strictly regulated sexual behavior, and often repressed or even proscribed the creative exploration of sensual desire. I am not proposing that religious traditions regulated or restricted sexual activity deliberately to hinder spiritual creativity and maintain the status quo of their doctrines. In my reading, all evidence seems to point to other social, cultural, moral and doctrinal factors.

What I am suggesting, in contrast, is that the social and moral regulation of sexuality may have had an unexpected debilitating impact on human spiritual creativity across traditions for cen-

turies. Although this inhibition may have been at times necessary in the past, today an increasing number of individuals may be prepared for a more creative engagement of their spiritual lives.

6. *Grounded spiritual visions:* As we have seen, most major spiritual traditions posit the existence of an isomorphism among the human being, the cosmos and the Mystery. From this correspondence it follows that the more dimensions of the person that are actively engaged in the study of the Mystery—or of phenomena associated with it—the more complete his or her knowledge will be. This ‘completion’ should not be understood quantitatively but rather in a qualitative sense. In other words, the more human dimensions creatively participate in spiritual knowing, the greater will be the dynamic congruence between inquiry approach and studied phenomena and the more grounded in, coherent with, or attuned to the ongoing unfolding of the Mystery will be our knowledge.

In this regard, it is likely that many past and present spiritual visions are to some extent the product of dissociated ways of knowing—ways that emerged predominantly from accessing certain forms of transcendent consciousness but in disconnection from more immanent spiritual sources. For example, spiritual visions that hold that body and world are ultimately illusory (or lower, or impure or a hindrance

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to spiritual liberation) arguably derive from states of being in which the sense of self mainly or exclusively identifies with subtle energies of consciousness, getting uprooted from the body and immanent spiritual life. From this existential stance, it is understandable, and perhaps inevitable, that both body and world are seen as illusory or defective. This account is consistent with the Kashmir Saiva view that the illusory nature of the world belongs to an intermediate level of spiritual perception (suddhavidyattva), after which the world begins to be discerned as a real extension of the Lord Siva. Indeed, when our somatic and vital worlds are invited to participate in our spiritual lives, making our sense of identity permeable to not only transcendent awareness but also immanent spiritual energies, then body and world become spiritually significant realities that are recognized as crucial for human and cosmic spiritual fruition.

7. *In-the-world nature:* We are born on earth. I passionately believe that this is not irrelevant, a mistake or the product of a delusional cosmic game whose ultimate goal is to transcend our embodied predicament. Perhaps, as some traditions tell us, we could have been incarnated in more subtle planes or levels of reality, but the fact that we did it here must be significant if we are to engage our lives in any genuinely wholesome and meaningful manner. To be sure, at certain crossroads on the spiritual path it may be necessary to go beyond our embodied existence in order to access essential dimensions of our identity (especially when external or internal conditions make it difficult or impossible to

connect with those dimensions in our everyday life). However, to turn this move into a permanent spiritual *modus operandi* can easily create dissociations in one's spiritual life leading to a devitalized body, an arrested emotional or interpersonal development, or lack of discrimination around sexual behavior—as the repeated sexual scandals of contemporary Western and Eastern spiritual teachers illustrate.

If we live in a closed and dark house, it is natural that we may feel pushed periodically to leave our home in search of the nourishing warmth and light of the sun. But an embodied spirituality invites us to open the doors and windows of our body so that we can always feel complete, warm and nurtured at home even if we may want at times to celebrate the splendor of the outside light. The crucial difference is that our excursion will not be motivated by deficit or hunger, but rather by the meta-need to celebrate, co-create with, and revere the ultimate creative Mystery. It is here in our home—earth and body—that we can develop fully as complete human beings without needing to 'escape' anywhere to find our essential identity or feel whole.

One does not need to hold a spiritual world view to recognize the miracle of Gaia (i.e., Earth as a living organism). Imagine that you are traveling throughout the cosmos, and after eons of dark and cold outer space, you find Gaia, the blue planet, with its luscious jungles and luminous sky, its warm soil and fresh waters and the inextricable wonder of embodied conscious life. Unless one is open to the reality of alternate physical universes, Gaia is the only place in the known cosmos where consciousness and matter co-exist and can achieve a gradual integration through participating human beings. The inability to perceive Gaia as paradise is simply a consequence of our collective condition of arrested incarnation.

8. Resacralization of nature: When the body is felt as our home, the natural world can be reclaimed as our homeland as well. This 'double grounding' in body and nature not only heals at its root the estrangement of the modern self from nature, but also overcomes the spiritual alienation—often manifesting as 'floating anxiety'—intrinsic to the prevalent human condition of arrested or incomplete incarnation. In other words, having recognized the physical world as real, and being in contact with immanent spiritual life, a complete human being discerns nature as an organic embodiment of the Mystery. To sense our physical surroundings as the Spirit's body offers natural resources for an ecologically grounded spiritual life.

9. Social engagement: A complete human being recognizes that, in a fundamental way, we are our relationships with both the human and nonhuman world, and this recognition is inevitably linked with a commitment to social transformation. To be sure, this commitment can take many different forms, from more direct active social or political action in the world (e.g., through social service, spiritually grounded political criticism or environmental activism) to more subtle types of social activism involving distant prayer, collective meditation or ritual. While there is still much to learn about the actual effectiveness of subtle activism, as

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well as about the power of human consciousness to directly affect human affairs, given our current global crisis, embodied spirituality cannot be divorced from a commitment to social, political and ecological transformation—whatever form this may take.

10. Integration of matter and consciousness: Disembodied spirituality is often based on an attempt to transcend, regulate and/or transform embodied reality from the 'higher' standpoint of consciousness and its values. Matter's experiential dimension as an immanent expression of the Mystery is generally ignored. This shortsightedness leads to the belief—conscious or unconscious—that everything related to matter is unrelated to the Mystery. This belief, in turn, confirms that matter and Spirit are two antagonistic dimensions. It then becomes necessary to abandon or condition the material dimension in order to strengthen the spiritual one. The first step out of this impasse is to rediscover the Mystery in its immanent manifestation; that is, to stop seeing and treating matter and the body as something that is not only alien to the Mystery but that distances us from the spiritual dimension of life. Embodied spirituality seeks a progressive integration of matter and consciousness that may ultimately lead to what we might call a state of 'conscious matter'. A fascinating possibility to consider is that a fuller integration of immanent and transcendent spiritual energies in embodied existence may gradually open the doors to extraordinary longevity or other forms of metanormal functioning attested to by the world's mystical traditions.

A Final Word

I conclude this essay with some reflections about the past, present and potential future of embodied spirituality. First, as even a cursory study of the lives of spiritual figures and mystics across traditions suggests, the spiritual history of humanity can be read, in part, as a story of the joys and sorrows of human dissociation. From ascetically enacted mystical ecstasies to world-denying monistic realizations, and from heart-expanding sexual sublimation to the moral struggles (and failures) of ancient and modern spiritual teachers, human spirituality has been characterized by an overriding impulse toward a liberation of consciousness that has too often taken place at the cost of the underdevelopment, subordination or control of essential human attributes such as the body or sexuality. This account does not seek to excoriate past spiritualities, which may have been at times—though by no means always—perfectly legitimate and perhaps even necessary in their particular times and contexts, but merely to highlight the historical rarity of a fully embodied or integrative spirituality.

continued on page 57