

12 ❁ Coming Home
to the Body

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In teaching movement and improvisation, I have found that when the mind is fully present with an activity, a radiance, a visually perceptible authenticity emerges. Both performer and audience sense this undeniable quality of presence. I call it "the authentic moment." In this moment the ordinary is experienced as remarkable.

Such moments come naturally to the untrained mover, who isn't sure what to do; since there are no familiar reference points, the mind is forced to stay in the immediate vicinity—which is the present moment. This naturalness can also be refined and developed. The practice of mindfulness—learning to discern sensations in the body in stillness and movement—can help us learn to be in our body in a more natural, spontaneous way.

The Buddha gave four primary postures for meditation: standing, sitting, walking, and lying down. We are always in one of these or on the way to one, so they are continually available to us as vehicles for mindfulness. We get up from bed; reach for a glass in the cupboard; lean over to scrub the

toilet; sit down at a table; cross our legs; look into the sky. Being “on the way”—in transition between these postures—also provides a potential focus for the mind.

To turn our attention to the movement of our bodies is an act of love, in the sense of self-regard. When people used to say, “You have to love yourself first,” I was never sure what this meant. I needed a tangible method. Techniques like visualization or writing affirmations never worked for me. But feeling my feet on the ground, the heat in my chest, the constriction in my head when I’m angry, the air over my bare feet as I walk, the sensation of my body turning in water—these all give me a sense that I am here, like it or not. There’s no mistaking what is happening and there’s no way to do it wrong. I am moving through the world with a sense of watching sweetly over it all. I am actually with myself, like a good friend, as I walk, run, dance, or sit down.

Of course, this doesn’t work if we are trying to sit in the chair with perfect posture, to dance artfully, or to run faster than the day before. Trained performers often struggle to reenact a genuineness they once felt, to relive a moment of past inspiration, instead of opening themselves to the rawness and vulnerability of the unknown present. To be at home in our body, it is important to open to the sensations of our movement without a lot of comment, without trying to live up to an image or to engage in a self-improvement campaign.

Letting things unfold in this way is at the heart of all improvisation that is fresh and alive. There is no one self-consciously doing it. It is as though we had just entered a theater and come upon a rehearsal in progress. It has a magical, one-of-a-kind, never-to-be-seen-again quality. Even if someone had a video camera and shot the scene for later viewing, it wouldn’t capture that authentic moment, which arose spontaneously out of our state of mind, the time of day, our receptivity to what we saw and felt—a thousand elements, none of which can be grasped or held onto.

Authentic expression often begins with quirky, jagged

edges. When we are grappling to express some profound truth in ourselves, our speech often becomes faltering, full of holes. Similarly, spontaneous movement can have a craggy quality, and is often a bit messy. We must give up the struggle to maintain our composure, to look good, and to cover up our moments of being at a loss. This requires a willingness to surrender and *fall* into the next movement, without preconceptions about how we will look. Falling requires letting go, as when we fall asleep or fall in love. If we refuse to fall, our body becomes rigid and our movements become premeditated.

We must also be willing to let ourselves “do it wrong,” and let our awkwardness be witnessed. To be seen like this may feel uncomfortable for the performer, but the spectator often finds it gripping and engaging. When we enter directly into our own discomfort, and let that be seen, this connects us with others. Although we may imagine them judging us, those who witness us in this moment of “falling apart” will often feel a tremendous sense of goodwill and intimacy with us.

Mindfulness practice trains us to drop into the body again and again. What we find when we look around in the body are sensations. All the drama of our thought, feeling, and action begins with sensations. Through mindfulness we train ourselves to be in the body to receive them. To be present with the sensations in our body is not an act of will. It is a kind of equanimity or grace. In such moments we feel our activity belonging to life. We wash the dishes as a holy act. We turn the key in the lock and know what the wrist is doing. Feeling our body turn away from the cold weather, we catch ourselves and consciously rise up to meet it. The choice to be aware is often an act of courage.

The essential practice here, which I learned from my meditation teacher, Ruth Denison, is to return to whatever presents itself in our experience from moment to moment, to feel the actual physical sensation of our aliveness. Movement invites attention, asks us to practice devotion to our-

selves, not in a self-centered way, but as an act of loyalty. Instead of abandoning ourselves, we can learn to inhabit ourselves. The body is tremendously homesick for us, and it waits patiently for our return. Though we have ignored its invitations for years and years, when we do say yes, now, it bounds forward with great exuberance and know-how. We find that we need no training in being fully alive, that we only lacked the determination to feel our aliveness. And here it is.

