

## Relaxed Groundedness

by John Prendergast, Ph.D.

Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to  
fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall.  
They do not know that the Void is not really void,  
but the realm of the real dharma.

HUANG PO

Gini bustled into my office several minutes late, flushed and a bit overwhelmed. As she sat on the sofa, catching her breath, she said, “I have *got* to get a grip on myself!”

“Maybe it’s not so much about getting a grip as it is about letting it go,” I suggested.

Gini was surprised by my response. She slowed down and looked at me more carefully; she was receptive and curious. As we quietly gazed for a minute or two, she relaxed and her attention clarified. Her breath slowed and her shoulders relaxed. Her eyes became calm, deep pools. Our attention dropped down from our heads into our bodies, like two passengers descending in an elevator.

Her tight inner grip quickly released, and we settled down into a deep, shared silence. We could both sense when she landed in her inner knowing; there is a palpable, spacious presence. The conversation unfolded from this grounded clarity as Gini explored her desire to set boundaries with various family members and to answer a strong inner call to resume writing poetry.

Gini’s story illustrates one of the most common markers of inner knowing: a core relaxation and sense of grounding. These two qualities are intimately related. When we open to our truth, a relaxation occurs in the core of the body and attention drops down from the head, moves through the body, and grounds like a tree rooting deeply into the earth.

Core Relaxation

Most of us unknowingly go through life with a tight grip in our inner core. This inner psychological grip corresponds to an outer physiological one. The mind is designed to grasp ideas, and the hands and arms are made to grasp objects. Each form of grasping is an attempt to be in control. Grasping something like a branch was useful for our ancestors, enabling them to swing through the trees, escape predators, gather fruit, and eventually make spears to hunt. Grasping ideas of ourselves and the world—virtual models of reality—allows us to plan, which provides a sense of control, however illusory this control may be.

We like to know who we are, how things work, and what others expect of us. Like Gini, in times of stress we may believe that we need to get a stronger grip on ourselves. In truth, we need to relax it. Our main stress comes from being too tightly wound. When I explain this principle to clients, I will sometimes use the metaphor of driving a car: if our grip on the steering wheel is too tense, we become a less safe driver. We need to be both alert *and* relaxed to gracefully navigate the road, as well as our life. Once Gini became deeply relaxed and grounded, she was able to approach the immediate challenges of her life with unusual clarity. If you reflect on your own life, I expect that you will discover the same thing. Too much tension obscures our natural wisdom.

We usually are not aware of this tension until we experience its opposite—a deep relaxation. This grip involves more than our muscles, although it includes them. For example, we can feel it as a tension in our face, jaw, shoulders and chest, solar plexus, lower belly, and even in our hands and feet. As our attention deepens and refines, we can also sense it in the core of our body. In addition to tensing physically, we tighten emotionally and energetically. We hold in our tender feelings and energies as a way to protect what is most precious—what we take to be ourselves.

We try to hold ourselves up and in as a way to survive. We instinctively and reflexively pull our attention up from the physical ground and in from the exterior of the body in order to be safe. For example, we naturally tense when we are afraid of potential physical danger. We are physically wired to anticipate and avoid it. Consider how you subtly tighten up when you are about to cross a busy street and how you relax once you have crossed.

Our deeper tension, however, is chronic and psychological. We are conditioned to try to control how we appear to others. We want to maintain an acceptable image within our “tribe,” whether that tribe is our immediate family, a circle of friends, or our larger community.

When we scratch the surface of a well-educated modern human, we find a tribal member.<sup>1</sup> There is a biological fear behind this concern for self-image. Outcasts never fared well in tribal societies—shunning meant almost certain death. When I explore my clients’ social anxieties around acceptance and approval, there is always an underlying fear of rejection. Once they uncover this layer, I will ask, “Then what will happen?” They inevitably discover a fear of being abandoned, becoming homeless, and eventually dying. In most cases a secure middle-class lifestyle does not seem to lessen this primal fear.

There are still subtler and more powerful fears around releasing the chronic inner grip upon ourselves: we may lose control, become disoriented, and not know who we are. Essentially, it is a fear of the unknown. We tend to choose a known suffering over an unknown freedom. If I am not a contracted, separate self, what am I? What will happen if this tight fist—this inner contraction that relates to my core sense of self—lets go? Will I fragment and go insane? Will I be able to function in daily life? Will I disappear?

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### **EXPERIMENT** Inquiry into the Fear of Losing Your Grip

What do you imagine would happen if you lost the inner grip on yourself? Ask yourself the question and then let it go.

Notice what comes up.

Bring your attention to your heart center and inquire: What is the truth? ●

We are as afraid of living as we are of dying. Recently, a client described feeling a new type of anxiety arise as he stepped out more fully into the world as his authentic self. He had been badly abused and neglected growing up and had dissociated from his body and distanced himself from people as a way to survive. As a child, he had formed a relationship with an inner “green man” that personified his essential self and provided him with a sense of connection to something greater. In trauma literature this figure is known as an ISH—an inner self-helper. As a boy, my client had been terrified that his abusers would come in the middle of the night and abduct his green man. As we explored his experience more deeply, he had an epiphany. “What could ever be taken from me now?” he asked. He saw that he had been trying to protect an essence that could never be taken or harmed; there was actually nothing inside to protect. He felt deeply relieved and much freer to open to life as it is.

Our limited sense of self is always insecure. The collection of images and stories, with their related feelings and memories, that we take to be the self is plagued by an inherent feeling of groundlessness. Everything that we identify with—our bodies, feelings, thoughts, roles, work, loved ones, and environment—changes. We accurately sense that the inner and outer rug could be pulled out at any moment.

I felt this most acutely after the death of my first wife, Linda, in 1989. The fabric of a normal, smoothly flowing life was ripped open, and I saw through the illusion of a steady world. I had intellectually known of impermanence before, but now I had the direct, heartbreaking experience of it. Only people who have lost a loved one can know what this is like. I also discovered how much I had relied on Linda to fill a sense of lack in myself. Her death touched my own fear of mortality, as well as an inner sense of groundlessness. The Buddhist philosopher and Zen priest David Loy describes this experience:

If the self is a delusive construct, there is a subtle yet significant distinction between the fear of death and fear of the void: Our deepest anxiety is our own groundlessness, which we become aware of as a sense of lack that motivates our compulsive attempts to ground ourselves, in one way or another. . . . This ungroundedness is like a hole at the core of my being.<sup>2</sup>

It was a sobering realization to see that I had been using my relationship with Linda to try to fill a hole in myself. Her death sparked a more honest and direct exploration into an underlying feeling of lack and my avoidance of it. Unknowingly, I had been subtly deceiving myself.

### Personal and Essential Authenticity

Tension is inevitable when we live a lie and try to appear different from how we actually are. We don't want to appear vulnerable or needy. We don't trust that we are fundamentally enough as we are, even with our struggles and shortcomings. We compensate outwardly by trying to do things that will prove our value to others. We also edit our self-image as we describe our life to ourselves and others—the image-maintenance project. Often this habit becomes so automatic that we are unaware of it. We unknowingly adopt a mask and mistake it for our real face, assuming that our chronically tense and armored body is natural. It is normal, perhaps, but not natural.

As I mentioned in chapter 2 of *In Touch*, deception is an evolutionary survival strategy used by all living organisms.<sup>3</sup> When we use it, however, we feel tense and split within ourselves. While a few people are capable of lying without any inner tension, most of us feel uncomfortable when we do.

The more sensitive and open we are, the less tolerable this inner discord becomes. A heartfelt confession (not of sin, but of the truth) brings tremendous relief. In the end, it always feels better to come clean and be in our integrity, even when there are painful consequences. Doing so is a sign of maturity.

I see the power of this truth in my psychotherapy practice, where my clients have a safe space to unpack all of the elements of their lives that they are afraid to reveal to others. A well-trained and mature psychotherapist offers a clear and compassionate space for clients to be witnessed and supported as they step through their shame, doubt, and fear and come into their integrity. Friends and partners can serve the same function if they are sufficiently accepting. Above all, though, we need to be honest with ourselves—a very challenging practice!

### **EXPERIMENT** Contemplate Deception

Take a few minutes and reflect upon times when you were purposefully deceptive.

What was your motive for withholding the truth?

How did it feel, particularly in the interior of your body?

If you eventually disclosed the truth, what did you experience? ●

We are complex multidimensional beings and are able to be authentic on some levels and not on others. For example, some people are personally authentic but not in integrity with their deepest nature. They are honest at work and in their personal lives but live with a feeling of groundlessness, disconnected from the whole of life. Others may intuit a genuine connection with life but struggle with honesty on a personal level, often because of early unmet emotional needs.

We can see this most dramatically with spiritual teachers who exploit their students for sex, money, or power. Sadly, this has become common in the West. This is an important area to explore for those of us—students or teachers—who are interested in an essential way of living, since it appears that knowing one's deepest nature does not immediately translate into being personally authentic. I had once thought that personal authenticity would automatically evolve as we contacted our inner being, but this doesn't appear to be true. For personal authenticity to develop, there also needs to be a deep commitment to actualizing the truth in daily life. In addition to knowing our true nature, we also need to be honest and vulnerable on a human level.

As the degree of congruence between how we think, feel, and act grows, so does our experience of inner relaxation and aliveness. Personal authenticity—facilitated by being in touch with our underlying needs and feelings and being honest with others—allows us to feel more at ease in our own skin. We become more self-accepting and less defensive. However, a subtler and more profound level of relaxation occurs when we realize our essential authenticity as nonseparate, open, empty, awake awareness. When we are attuned and congruent with our deepest nature, the chronic inner grip of tension uncoils.

### Trusting That We Are Held

One of the reasons that we try so hard to hold ourselves up and in is because we don't feel held by something greater. This brings us to the issue of trusting life, no matter what. Some call this trust *faith*, but faith usually means believing in something. Trust is not based on a belief. Rather, it is a felt sense of being held by a benevolent presence or field that is greater than the little me. Trust allows us to let go. This is not a trust that things will go as we want. Rather, it is a trust that life will unfold as it needs to.

Consider the following parable: Once there was a group of mountaineers who were trying to ascend K2, the second-highest peak in the world, in the Karakoram range in Pakistan. One night they were trapped in a terrible storm and were forced to turn back. During the perilous descent, one of the members lost his lighting, became separated from the group, and had to rappel the mountainside on his own. He came to

the end of his rope, and he could not see or feel the ground beneath him. He was also too exhausted and cold to ascend. Hanging in the dark of the raging storm, he cried out for help, but no one could hear or see him. Although he was not a religious man, he calmed himself and prayed for guidance. The answer came immediately as a quiet inner voice, which said, "Just let go of the rope." He was too frightened to trust the guidance and continued to hold on. The following morning the search crew found him frozen to death, dangling in the air two feet above a rocky ledge.

Like the unfortunate mountaineer, we are frozen by our mistrust of life. We are reluctant to let go until we are completely certain that we are at the end of our metaphoric rope. Even then, we hold on. Often it takes a health or relationship crisis to catalyze a deep surrender of the illusion of control and a true willingness to let go.

When we feel held by something greater, however, it is much easier to trust and let go. Psychological conditioning can contribute to or detract from the sense of being held. If we have had a secure attachment with a caretaker and no major trauma growing up, the sense of being held is easier to access and sustain. Yet this sense does not originate from or depend upon having been well parented. It is always available.

#### **EXPERIMENT** Feeling Yourself Held by the Earth

Find a comfortable chair in a quiet place and close your eyes. Take a few slow, deep breaths and relax.

Feel the weight of your body in the chair and the contact of your feet with the floor. Notice what it is like to allow your body to be held by the earth's gravity.

When you breathe, imagine your inhalation coming up from the earth and your exhalation releasing down into it. As your breath deepens into the earth, feel yourself completely held.

Relax into this sense. ●

Sometimes I experience this sense of being held in nature. Whenever I close my eyes and float on my back in a lake or a bay, I spontaneously burst out laughing. The sense of being held by something greater, even on a physical level, is delightful. I highly recommend it! Denise Levertov captures the yearning for and effortless nature of this feeling in her poem "The Avowal":

As swimmers dare to lie face to the sky and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them  
so would I learn to attain freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace, knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

Levertov identifies a central paradox for the mind: letting go cannot be forced. The mind can relax, however, when it realizes that it does not know how to surrender.

My friend Steve Hadland, a hospice physician who lives by Tomales Bay on the California coast, experienced this sense of being deeply held while lying in his rowboat one clear, chilly morning in December.

The sun was well up and warmed my face as I rowed northwest into deeper waters. Apart from the sound of the oars and the splash of a seal, nothing broke the silence.

I slipped off the seat and lay back on the narrow deck looking up at the unclouded blue sky. Little waves lapped against the hull. Resting in the good company of sea, sun, and sky—this was what had been calling me. I felt soothed and rocked like a baby.

Recalling the words of the great sage Nisargadatta, “Pleasure and pain are only waves on an ocean of bliss,” I allowed myself to feel not only the surface waves, but the palpable sense of being afloat, buoyed up by the bay and by the whole ocean itself—the vast, unbroken Pacific. The margins of body, boat, wave, and sea blurred and merged into one another. There was one boat, one sea, one world afloat in the black immensity of space, and I not apart from that.

#### The Four-Stage Continuum of Groundedness

The ground is both a metaphor and a felt sense. As a metaphor, it means to be in touch with reality. As a felt sense, it refers to feeling our center of gravity low in the belly and experiencing a deep silence, stability, and connection with the whole of life. Feeling grounded does not require contact with the earth; it can happen anywhere and anytime—even when we’re flat on our backs in a rowboat.

Reality is inherently grounding. The more in touch with it we are, the more grounded we feel. This is as true of the facts of daily life as it is of our true nature. Life is multidimensional, ranging from the physical to the subtle to formless awareness. When we are in touch with physical reality, we feel physically grounded. As subtle levels of feeling and energy unfold, we feel subtly grounded. When we know ourselves as open awareness, not separate from anything, we rest in and as our deepest ground that is sometimes called our homeground or groundless ground.

As attention deepens and opens, our experience of and identification with the physical body changes. Our felt sense of the ground shifts accordingly. After decades of working with clients and students, I have observed a continuum of groundedness that spans four broad experiential stages: no ground, foreground, background, homeground. Each has a corresponding body identity.

## No Ground

With the stage of no ground, it feels like we are barely in our bodies. We feel ungrounded. Our attention is on the surface or at a short distance from our body in a dissociative state. If we normally dwell in this stage as an adult, it is almost always because of childhood abuse or neglect. When we were being abused, it simply felt too dangerous to be present in the body. With neglect, it felt as if we weren't worth being attended to. Reworking this conditioning usually takes time. A safe, steady, and warmly attuned relationship allows attention to gradually reenter the body. Specialized somatic approaches also help.

We can experience temporary *states* of no ground when we are very ill or have been traumatized by an accident or an abrupt loss. Most of us have had tastes of this disembodied, ungrounded state. As an odd coincidence, as I was writing the previous sentence, my son came into my room to inform me that my car was missing. Sure enough, when I went outside, it was nowhere to be found. I briefly felt very ungrounded and disoriented. It turns out I had left the car parked at work two days before, and having immersed myself in writing at home, I had completely forgotten about it! Some people experience this ungrounded feeling through their whole lives.

## Foreground

The foreground stage unfolds as we get more in touch with our needs and feelings. The interior of the body opens as we learn to feel our feelings and sense our sensations. Attention drops down from the head and into the trunk and core of the body. We can feel more of what is happening in the heart area and the gut. This is a big discovery for people who have been trained to overly rely on their thinking—something our information-saturated society increasingly cultivates. Most psychotherapy and somatic approaches focus on this domain, helping people to be more in touch with themselves on a personal level and more open to relating with others.

When we experience the foreground deeply, we feel very much in the body. As subtle dimensions awaken, essential qualities such as love, wisdom, inner strength, and joy emerge. The body begins to feel less dense and more like energy—porous and light.

Here is a description by John Greiner, one of my interviewees, that fits this stage of being richly foregrounded in his body:

When I am in touch with the truth, there's a sense of calmness and being well-grounded. When I say calmness, it's throughout my whole body. It's a sense of being connected to the earth, almost as if there are roots. When I'm really grounded, it feels like it goes all the way to the center of the earth. It doesn't matter if I'm walking or I'm sitting, but that is a big part of my foundation.

Many spiritual approaches try to cultivate these subtle qualities and experiences so that they become stronger or last longer. While these practices can enhance the quality of personal life, they can also fuel an endless self-improvement project and delay the discovery of true inner freedom. Most psychospiritual approaches stop at this stage, satisfied with an enriched experience of the foreground.

## Background

The background stage of awareness generally remains unrecognized, quietly out of view. It is like the page upon which words are written or the screen upon which a movie plays. It is the *context* within which the *contents* of awareness—thoughts, feelings, and sensations—arise. It is easily overlooked even though it is implicit in any experience. We cannot experience anything without awareness, yet when we try to objectify awareness, we can't. Looking for and trying to define it is like the eye trying to turn upon itself; what is seeing cannot be seen. As a result, the mind dismisses it.

Attention is like a wave on the ocean of awareness. Sometimes it peaks, focusing upon a particular experience, and other times it subsides back into its source. At some point, either because we have an intuition of this source or because we are seasick from the waves (suffering from our attachments and identifications), we become interested in following attention back toward its origin. This exploration may take the form of an intense, heartfelt inquiry—"What is this that is aware? Who am I really?"—or a simple, meditative resting in silence. It is more of an orientation than a technique.

As attention comes to rest quietly in the heart, not knowing, the background eventually comes into conscious awareness. At some point, we recognize that this is who we really are—infinite, open, empty, awake awareness. This recognition brings great freedom as we see that we are not bounded by space or time. We are not at all who we thought we were. No story or image can define or confine us.

When we recognize our true nature as this unbounded awareness, we experience our body as being inside us, much like a cloud within the clear sky. Some spiritual traditions stop here, content with this transcendent realization.

When I was a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies a few years ago, one of my students, Dan Scharlack, who had been a Buddhist meditator for years, approached me and asked if I would be there for him, as he was going through an intense spiritual opening. Without thinking I agreed, although we had only recently met and I did not know what "being there" would entail. It turned out that my offer of support was all that he needed. He came back a week or two later and reported having had the following dramatic experience:

I just wanted to let go into the emptiness, no matter what happened. It was strange, but as soon as the decision arose, there was also spontaneously a sense that I actually knew how to move into

and through it. Nevertheless I felt like I wanted someone there with me when I did it in case something bad happened. . . .

As I came to the same impasse, I felt my torso begin to shake. My heart was beating so fast that it felt like it would come out of my chest. My whole body moved in violent convulsions that almost sent me off the [meditation] cushion. I jerked forward, then back, and everything inside of me felt like it was screaming. My body was convulsing as it never had before. In spite of all of this, there was a sense that I just had to stay with the emptiness no matter what. There was a feeling of deep surrender, and I knew in that moment that I was willing to die for this.

And then it just kind of popped. I felt awareness move up my spine, out of the back of my heart, and out through the top of my head. While the shaking continued, it was less violent, and it was as if I was watching it from above and behind my body. Everything was incredibly quiet, and I had the unmistakable sense of looking down on my body from above with a deep feeling of compassion and sweetness for the one who was shaking.

When I finally opened my eyes, it was as if I was looking at the world for the first time. Everything felt crisp, alive, and fascinating.

Dan's experience illustrates a marked shift of attention and identity from the foreground to the background stage of awareness. It was an initial awakening to his true nature.

### Homeground

A final stage of discovery awaits—the realization of our homeground. Even when we know ourselves as the background, a subtle duality continues between background and foreground, the knower and the known. The true nature of the body and, by extension, the world remains to be fully discovered. The felt sense of infinite awareness begins to saturate the body, often from the top down, as it penetrates into the core and transforms our emotional and instinctual levels of experience. It almost always takes years for this awareness to deeply unfold. As this happens, the body and the world feel increasingly transparent. We realize that the world is our body. The distinction between the background and the foreground, knower and known, dissolves. There is only knowing. Everything is seen and felt as an expression of awareness. There is a deep sense of being at home, as no-thing and everything. We could also speak of this as a groundless ground, a ground that is nowhere and everywhere. Words fail to capture it fully.

In 2010, I visited the Pech Merle cave in France, one of the few caves with extensive prehistoric paintings that remain open to the public. Since an earlier visit to Lascaux, I have been fascinated by these elegant charcoal and pigment drawings of horses, bison, aurochs (Paleolithic cattle), and mammoths, along with an occasional human handprint, some of which date as far back as 33,000 BCE. I have been equally drawn to the dark, silent caves that shelter these exquisite works of art.

Early one morning my wife, Christiane, and I joined a small group moving down a flight of stairs from a well-lit gift shop to the entrance of the cave about one hundred feet below. We stepped through the doorway into a completely different world—dark, cool, and unimaginably silent.

After a brief orientation, our guide warned us to stay together and began to lead us along a dimly lit path through the winding underground caverns. Despite her admonition, I felt compelled to hold back. As her voice and the footsteps of the others became increasingly faint in the darkness, I savored the extraordinary silence. The dark space beneath the earth and the feeling of open ground deep within my body became one ground—vibrant, dark, and mysterious.

The outer and inner ground were not different; there was no separate knower and something known. I felt completely at home and at peace in the silence. There was a clear sense of knowing this homeground. Reluctantly, I rejoined the group after a few minutes.

### Experiencing the Four Stages

Our sense of groundedness and our identification with our body are usually fairly stable and tend to localize in a particular stage somewhere along the continuum. For most people, it is localized in the foreground stage, where we experience being in our bodies. In contrast, our inner somatic, emotional, and mental states fluctuate according to many factors—health, stress, and occasional epiphanies—so that we can feel more or less grounded at any particular moment. States are constantly in flux, while stages change slowly. For instance, if I learn of the unexpected death of a close friend, I may experience a temporary state of being ungrounded, as if the rug has been pulled out from beneath me. The shock of the news may trigger me to feel dissociated for a while. In this case, my attention temporarily regresses from the stage of foreground to the stage of no ground. After a short time, my center of ground will return to its familiar stage.

If we usually feel fairly dissociated and ungrounded due to a chaotic childhood and then settle into a stable relationship as an adult, our stage of ground may gradually change from no ground to foreground. Instead of feeling mostly out of our body, we will feel mostly in our body. Effective psychotherapy can help facilitate this shift in stages.

As our spiritual life opens, we may begin to have experiences of being open and less identified with our body. At first these experiences may be fleeting glimpses or states. At some point, we may shift from the stage of feeling that we are in our body to the stage of sensing that we are open awareness within which our body exists. The sense of groundedness opens into a vast space. Everything that we have taken ourselves to be—sensations (body), feelings, and thoughts—is witnessed as an object in awareness. This is the background stage. As this open awareness penetrates deeply into the conditioned body, we begin to

experience the world much more intimately. We have the sense that everything is made of this awareness and that nothing is separate from us. This fourth stage is our homeground.

These four stages—no ground, foreground, background, and homeground—don't always unfold in a smooth order. We can even skip a stage and revisit it later, although this is quite rare. For example, it is possible to be in a dissociative stage of no ground and suddenly be catapulted into the background stage of formless awareness. This uncommon event can leave someone feeling simultaneously spacy (dissociative) and spacious (open and unattached). I know a woman who experiences this. Her integrative work is to come more into her body—to better know the foreground. Doing so will also allow her to feel her homeground, her essential nonseparation from everything, including her body.

It is much more common for the gravity of identity to shift from foreground to background, from being someone to being no one, as Dan experienced. It is a very significant opening; however, at some point, attention returns to the foreground of human feelings to accomplish a thorough, integrative “mopping up.” Nothing is left behind in this process of embodying awareness. As Adyashanti poetically notes,

“Love returns for itself.”<sup>4</sup>

It is very common to have brief glimpses of a more mature stage and then settle back into a familiar one. Almost everyone has experienced expansive states of consciousness that were induced by witnessing beauty, making love, being in the presence of a genuine teacher, meditating, ecstatic dancing and drumming, psychoactive substances, or for no apparent reason at all. It is as if a camera lens temporarily opens and we are exposed to a much wider perspective. The doors of perception briefly clear.

Spiritual seekers often get attached to these experiences and try unsuccessfully to recreate them. These foretastes ignite a yearning to return home, along with confusion about how this return happens.

While we cannot manufacture these openings, we can make ourselves available to them. A regular sitting meditation practice can be helpful, if it is done innocently. Likewise, self-inquiry helps to bring space from our beliefs and identities. When our attention opens to the felt sense of the ground, it is important to give ourselves fully to it. If it closes, then it is important to carefully observe the process. How do we unenlighten ourselves? What old stories and identities do we take on? Each glimpse of our deeper nature widens our capacity and reorients the body-mind.

It is also very common for attention to regress to a prior stage. In fact, this is an inevitable part of an integrative process that effectively explores and develops the foreground of individual feelings and needs. If we are willing to feel our feelings and sense our sensations, we will encounter unintegrated parts of the psyche. Temporary regression is inevitable and necessary. We go back through prior conditioning (in the present) to unpack, release, and reclaim what is of value. Inner child work is an example of this. The unfolding process is dynamic and unique for each of us. It is important to trust and follow it.

Even as reality is inherently grounding, it is also inherently ungrounding if we have not been living in accord with it. The truth is rarely convenient for those who have not been friends with it. For example, if I am used to being heavily armored in my body and out of touch with my feelings, it can be very disorienting when an interior sensitivity begins to open. I may feel vulnerable and shaky until I get used to the new sensations and the feelings of intimacy they bring. Similarly, if my work or relationships have been out of integrity, facing this reality can initially be very destabilizing.

On a deeper level, if I have strongly identified with being just this physical body and discover that who I am is the light of pure awareness empty of any definition, I may also feel very unsettled. Or I may be hugely relieved. Meditators will sometimes experience each of these polarities at different times, particularly on longer retreats. When this process goes through an especially intense phase, it can feel like we are both living in and *are* a house that is being remodeled.

Not surprisingly, the felt sense of the ground is often directly related to the root chakra at the base of the spine. When there is a strong contraction in this energy center, there is a weak felt sense of the ground. This chakra is one of the key strongholds of the inner grip. As I mentioned in chapter 2 of *In Touch*, this contraction directly relates to the fear of survival, either physically or psychologically. The threat of psychological annihilation usually appears as a fear of abandonment (“I’ll be all alone”), engulfment (“I’ll be smothered”), or fragmentation (“I’ll fall apart and go crazy”).

When we have lived with this contraction for many years, it becomes a shallow ground of its own—a kind of thin ice. It is as if we take our stand upon a familiar, although highly unstable, inner island of suffering. We become surprisingly attached to our chronic holding patterns; they give us a self-definition in the same way that living in a prison allows us to identify as a prisoner. Separating from them can be like prying a child away from her abusive parents. Clients will sometimes describe these contracted energetic and emotional states as “comfort zones,” but they are anything but comfortable.

Letting go can feel like a freefall. I was once working with a client whose longtime friend had lost her son to suicide. My client had known the young man his whole life, and it was a devastating loss for everyone. As she closed her eyes and let her attention drop down and in, she sensed a contraction at the base of her spine. As she felt into it, it suddenly released, and she had the image of a trapdoor opening and her body free falling into dark, empty space. Instead of panicking, however, she relaxed into the feeling of being held by nothing and experienced a clear sense of nonseparation from everything. In that moment, the ground was wide open—or perhaps I should say that she was wide open to her homeground.

Eckhart Tolle experienced this shift into the background stage at age twenty-nine, when he was a very depressed graduate student at the University of Cambridge. One night he awoke with a feeling of

complete dread, loathing the world and longing for annihilation. He had the repetitive thought that he could no longer live with himself:

Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. “Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ that ‘I’ cannot live with.” Maybe, I thought, only one of them is real.

I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts. Then I felt drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy. It was a slow movement at first and then accelerated. I was gripped by an intense fear, and my body started to shake. I heard the words “resist nothing” as if spoken inside my chest. I could feel myself being sucked into a void. It felt as if the void was inside myself rather than outside. Suddenly there was no more fear, and I let myself fall into that void. I have no recollection of what happened after that.<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of interesting elements in Tolle’s experience. First, he was desperately depressed; life held no interest for him. Second, his mind was stopped by a paradoxical thought—a naturalistic koan: was he one or two selves? If he was two, perhaps one of them was not real. Third, his familiar identity began to collapse and along with it the sense of ground as he felt sucked down an energetic vortex and into a void within himself. And, finally, although he was terrified, he trusted an inner voice inside his chest that counseled him to not resist. He completely let go into a free fall. He was like the mountaineer in the earlier parable, except that he was able to trust his inner knowing. When Tolle woke up in the morning, he reported he felt as if he had been born into a fresh and pristine world.

Our sense of groundedness has different flavors as other essential qualities emerge with it. For example, there may be feelings of love, flow, and a connection with being. When I interviewed my friend Riyaz Motan, a psychotherapist, he described his evolving sense of the ground in this way:

Just as we talked about [the ground], I sensed it immediately as a rootedness—of energy going down through the feet and out into the earth. Even the earth doesn’t quite describe it—just a sense of rootedness into ground. The image of a pyramid comes, that feels really wide with a solid base.

As I sense the ground more, part of what happens is the heart comes more into it. There is a sense of receptivity, empathy, and softness. There is a dual quality of real solidity and strength and yet softness, receptivity, and openness.

Being in touch with the felt sense of the ground as a solid, rooted base allows the heart to open. The safer we feel, the more easily we can sustain an open heart.

When I spoke with Silke Greiner, a gifted bodyworker, she described a deeper level of groundedness that arose when she connected with being:

JP: As you described that connection [with being] coming into awareness, you moved your hands upward from the ground.

Silke: Right.

JP: The sense of connection becomes clearer and more alive for you.

Silke: Yeah, I guess it's very deep. When it's just a relative truth, it is not as deep. This really is what I'm describing when I'm down into the truth of being because I'm not always as aware of it in my day-to-day life. But when I'm really sitting down, when I'm working [bodywork/massage], I take that space and open myself to it. The truth of being just appears.

Silke contrasted her experience of being relatively grounded in every-day life with a deeper sense of groundedness and connection that she opened to when she sat and worked with people. The "truth of being" came clearly into her awareness. This sense is available to each of us at any moment if we are willing to slow down and listen. Doing so is like turning our face toward an invisible sun. We just need to remember that it is here awaiting our attention.

## Summary

As we attune with inner knowing, we experience a deep relaxation in the core of our body and a growing sense of groundedness. However, most of us are in a state of chronic inner tension as we try to subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) control ourselves and the environment. Some of this tension is concerned with biological survival, while most of it is concerned with psychological survival—the preservation of the self-image. The psychological self—the little me—is always insecure and defends itself against potential annihilation. This manifests in the body as an attempt to hold ourselves up and in with an inner grip or core contraction. We can be forced to release this grip when we encounter a crisis that makes us let go of the illusion of control and/or brings the insight that it is futile and more painful to try to hang on. The chronic grip also softens as we live more authentically, both personally and essentially. Feeling held by something greater than our limited self also allows the letting go to happen more gracefully. Letting go requires trusting in life—no matter what.

Reality is inherently grounding. The more in touch with it we are, the more grounded we feel. This is true on every level: physical, mental, emotional, energetic, and spiritual. Reality can be temporarily ungrounding to us when we have been living out of accord with it.

There is a continuum of groundedness with distinctive stages that sometimes coexist: no ground, foreground, background, and homeground. Each stage has a corresponding body identification. Attention can move fluidly between stages, and we can experience foretastes, regressions, and an occasional gravitational shift of identity between stages.

The openness of the energy center at the base of the spine is directly related to the depth of experiencing groundedness. Letting go can sometimes feel like a free fall. Our felt sense of the ground deepens with our attunement with being and is often accompanied by the experience of other essential qualities such as love, connection, and flow.

#### Endnotes

1. Greene, *Moral Tribes*.
2. Loy, *Lack and Transcendence*, 109.
3. Smith, *Why We Lie*.
4. “Love Returning for Itself: An Interview with Adyashanti” in Prenderast, Fenner, and Krystal, eds., *The Sacred Mirror*.
5. Tolle, *The Power of Now*.

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