

A Body Awareness Practice: From Ego to Essence

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Is it possible to practice being in my Essence in a way that doesn't require a lot of mental processing? When I am really caught in my ego is there a way I can quickly recognize that and shift more easily back into Essence without going into the "story"? Where do I focus my attention and rest my awareness while engaging in activity throughout my day so that I feel centered and grounded? These are some of the questions I have been asking over the years as I have been working with various transformational practices. Here are some of my thoughts in that regard.

Let's say that there are two main categories of consciousness that we can reside in: ego and essence. Inner Bonding might call the ego the *wounded self* and essence our *core child*.

Ego

When I am absorbed in an egoic state of consciousness I feel separate and alone regardless of my environment. I will usually experience some type of emptiness or feeling of lack inside of me, and the world becomes filled with objects to be controlled (especially people) in order to either avoid unpleasantness or obtain something satisfactory. When I am anchored in ego, I feel cut off from a sense of meaning and purpose (other than getting egoic, animal needs met) and I don't feel attuned to the presence of something bigger and grander than myself. Life also becomes very serious because I feel like I am constantly being attacked and victimized.

While focused in this state I notice a lot of unloving thoughts arising. Stories and scenarios regurgitate in my mind about what I did or said in the past, and I focus on attempting to control outcomes in the future. I become a prisoner to unloving thoughts that seem to assault me and stick in my consciousness like a teenager (or middle-aged male therapist) glued to their smart phone. The more I try to avoid, deny or fight the unloving, egoic thoughts and accompanying feelings, the more stuck and frustrated I become. The world becomes stale, boring, flat, two-dimensional, unloving, and uninspiring. And, so do I! I would call this egoic state of mind a sort of "hell". But it is a hell many don't recognize. And even when we do periodically recognize what's happening, the very effort we make to "escape" gets us even more stuck.

Interestingly, I have noticed that while I am in this hellish egoic state, my awareness is primarily centered in my head. Have you ever sat back and just observed how people walk, converse and move? Most tend to steer from their head and/or upper body as they move and talk, with the head stretched out ahead of the body. And, where it goes, the rest of the body follows. This can be an indicator that the person is currently a prisoner of their ego—that they are caught up in thoughts of their egoic sense of self and are allowing "it" to interpret and direct their lives.

Essence

On the other hand, there is a different “place” where we can abide that stands in stark contrast to that of our imprisoning ego. When we find ourselves centered in our Essence, it is an incredibly positive experience: we feel peaceful, safe, alive, grateful, connected, inspired, loving, adventurous, empowered, present, buoyant and joyful. This is a state that I would call a sort of “heaven”. I imagine most people who are on the spiritual path experience these heavenly moments intermittently. Perhaps we experience this feeling of being centered in Essence right after an Inner Bonding process or mindfulness meditation, during a Yoga or Qigong workout, after navigating a difficult but heart-opening communication with our partner, or while out in the magnificence of nature. Some of us feel connected in this way while dancing, singing or while creatively expressing ourselves.

But how do we reside here amidst the duties and responsibilities of full and engaged lives? When you observe people who are in this state of mind you might notice that they are fully inhabiting their bodies. Their hearts are open and warm and they probably experience a fullness and satiated feeling in their bellies. Their bodies move spontaneously and naturally as a complete and elegant whole (like that of a young child not yet captured by ego). If you watch closely, you might see that they are more directed from their lower torso with the head following—it is as if they are attuned to something deep within their core and are allowing it to direct them. The head becomes the means for the expression of Essence rather than being its tyrannical and fearful dictator.

Using Body Awareness as Integrative Spiritual Practice

I would propose that the sign of a growing spiritual maturity is not so much that we don't become triggered into egoic states, but rather that we don't reside there for as long. To this end, we can use body awareness as a moment-to-moment practice to support our ripening maturity.

We can practice shifting the focus of our awareness—our felt sense of self—from the head down into our core. When I speak of “core” I am referring to the area of either the solar plexus or lower dantian/hara area below the navel. Bringing awareness into the heart area can be very beneficial as well, but is different and not what I am referring to in this article. Resting our awareness and having a felt sense of self down in this core area provides a quick and simple method to train ourselves to stay centered in Essence during our daily activities. When we get caught in ego we notice it because our awareness has drifted back up into the head region. To shift back into Essence, we simply notice where our awareness is currently located (head) and bring ourselves back down into connection with our core (belly) by breathing, relaxing and sinking our focus back into that region of our body.

Shifting awareness in this way is a centering practice that is very practical and concrete amidst the stressors of daily life. This one simple practice instantly involves opening the heart, shifting into the intention to learn (instead of control), and reconnecting with ourselves and Spirit itself. All of this happens automatically when we breathe into our center, let go of our egoic thoughts and find our felt sense of ourselves in the belly. This is one way we can really come home to ourselves without needing to process, analyze or figure things out so much.

When anchored in the safety and love of our true sense of self, we feel more empowered to face and release unloving thoughts and unpleasant experiences because we do not feel so identified with or threatened by them. From this centered Essence state we see the thoughts instead of getting caught in them. Thus we do not need to fight them, deny them or believe them. When anchored in our core Essence we can face and open to everything, thereby allowing Spirit to flow into and through us. This invites Spirit to transform and release the unloving blocks that have kept us so stuck and absorbed in our egoic thinking minds.

My first profound experience of this came during an Aikido test. I noticed that when my awareness was up in my head, I was filled with fearful thoughts and judgments but that when I dropped my awareness down into my Hara (belly) and breathed the fears into this center, the anxiety dissolved almost instantly and I felt calm, safe and confident. This experience was very surprising to me at the time and has subsequently prompted me to explore this practice more in other areas of my life. I now enjoy practicing while riding my motorcycle, sitting with clients or in large crowds of people. I find that I can rest in my Essence more easily and it is so pleasurable to come “home”!

If this simple practice resonates for you, I would encourage you to experiment and have fun with it. For those interested in reading more about the topic, I recommend Karlfried Graf Dürckheim’s fascinating book, *Hara: The Vital Center of Man*. You might also find the work of Thomas Crum, with his Aikido background, interesting and very simple to understand. For more complexity and depth, I would advise reading the work of A.H. Almaas, particularly his book: *The Pearl Beyond Price: Integration of Personality into Being*. Barbara Brennan also has covered the topic extensively in her book *Light Emerging*. In addition, any good Qigong or Tai Chi teacher will be familiar with the lower dantian and have practices to increase anchoring awareness into our core. Enjoy!

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