

Start with Your Body

BY PHILLIP MOFFITT, CYNDI LEE, GESHE TENZIN WANGYAL RINPOCHE, ANNE KLEIN AND REGINALD RAY | SEPTEMBER 1, 2009

A panel discussion with Phillip Moffitt, Cyndi Lee, Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche and Reggie Ray. Introduction by Anne Carolyn Klein.



Photo by Craig Whitehead.

When we hear words like “meditation,” “mindfulness,” or “mind training,” we often assume we’re working with our minds alone. But nothing could be further from the way it really is. Meditation, mindfulness, and mind training are full-being enterprises. They involve our whole body and our body’s energies, including how speech expresses those energies, and how mind rides on them.

It’s not surprising that we think about mind training in this way. Since Descartes, Western culture has articulated a chasm-like divide between mind and body, and an analogous one between reason and emotion. But emotions are experienced so strongly through the body that when we leave it out of our meditation equation, we are likely to leave feelings aside as well. And when meditation does not encompass feelings, it is difficult for practice to reorient our lives as deeply as we intend it to do and need it to do.

The discussion here illuminates the body’s importance in several ways. As Phillip Moffitt and Reggie Ray point out, observation of the body helps us overcome the sense of solidity we have superimposed on it. In this way, the body gives us access to our conditioned nature, a teaching central to Buddhist teachings. The more dualistic our sense of mind and body, the more we objectify the body and see it as a tool for our use. This, in turn, reinforces our mistaken sense of the body as a thing. As all students of Buddhism know, moving past the illusion of solidity is

vital for removing the further delusion that we are, or have, a self-enclosed independent self. We are not such a self, and we don't have such a self. Never did.

The panelists note that by beginning with “the part of our minds we call the body,” we find easier access to stabilizing our awareness. As Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche points out, if we work with the body, we can avoid forcing the mind to be quiet. The mind will quiet naturally, because body and mind profoundly affect one another. Focused on the body, our mind is less likely to wander off into our own story lines.

Moreover, through understanding the way coarse and subtle energies move through the body, we can appreciate that our posture directly affects our minds, just as the state of our mind will also affect our body. This is the significance of the different postures and movements of Tibetan and Indian yogic practices.

Through an experience of the conditioned nature of the body, we also begin to approach the unconditioned. The body can bring us to the ultimate in two ways.

First, as noted, we can see through the illusions of permanence, solidity, or independence that we superimpose on our body and everything else, especially our sense of self. Unless we stop to reflect, even our own mind appears to us in that guise: “I’m always angry. I can’t change this.”

Second, the state of enlightenment itself is expressed in what are known as the three bodies, or dimensions. These are purified analogues of our own body. Our “buddha-fied” physical body becomes the emanation body (*nirmanakaya*), our energy becomes the resplendent body (*sambhogakaya*), and our genuine mind becomes the truth body (*dharma^{kaya}*). There is much to understand here at a refined level. At the very least, it is clear we must open deeply to the subtle reality of our own body, speech-energy, and mind-nature to manifest their enlightened potential.

Viewed in these ways, the body is not just something associated with our individual manifestation in the world. When we feel into it more subtly, we can experience what Cyndi Lee calls “the energetic circuitry” that connects people. This is a palpable force in practice, and an important reason why all Buddhist traditions encourage us to practice together, in the same room, or in imagined synchronicity, so that the dedication of our full minds and bodies can support us in the unfolding of practice. As Nagarjuna famously said, through paying attention to the conventional, the conditioned, we will recognize the ultimate, the unconditioned. We recognize it not as some abstract truth, but as our own intimate nature, the ground of the entire mind–body system.

Buddhadharma: In Western culture, meditation is most often thought of as a mental or psychological practice. In what way is it also a body practice?

Cyndi Lee: I once heard Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara from the Village Zendo in New York say when she was giving meditation instruction, “The first thing we do is start with that part of our minds that we call our body.” I love that. To me, starting with the body is a no-brainer. If you can’t sit upright, if you have bad digestion, if you don’t sleep well, that makes it pretty difficult to have mental clarity and stamina, to be able to keep up your commitment. It’s essential to have some kind of strength and stability in your body if you want to cultivate that in your mind.

Phillip Moffitt: In the Theravada tradition, the *Satipatthana Sutta* presents the most concise teaching of mindfulness practice in the form of the four foundations. The Buddha lays out the

spectrum of awarenesses in this teaching, and the first awareness is “awareness of the body in the body.” This becomes the foundation from which the other awarenesses of your experience are understood. We come to understand how our awareness of the pleasant and the unpleasant in the body controls the mind. Then we move to awareness of the mind states themselves, but these utilize the body as well. How do you know anything other than through the body?

I’ve found that students who don’t have the ability to stay aware of what’s going on in the body, who don’t know how to place attention in the body and in various parts of the body, are much less likely to develop in their practice. They get stuck.

Buddhadharma: You spoke of the Buddha’s formulation of “awareness of the body in the body.” What do you take this to mean?

Phillip Moffitt: Orienting toward direct, nonconceptual experience. Not staying in your head. I use the term “dropped attention,” which comes from aikido. We drop out of our head and into direct experience, what’s often called the “felt sense.” We have views and opinions about our experience, but here we are talking about knee pain as a direct experience, not our view and opinion about knee pain. Direct experience of knee pain is about twisting, burning, expanding, contracting, pulsating, coming in waves, whatever it may be. That is knowing knee pain, and there are so many different awarenesses that arise out of that. You immediately see that it’s not a solid experience.

In modern terms, we are deconstructing phenomena. We are looking at moment-to-moment phenomena as they arise. The Buddha was the original deconstructionist, the original phenomenologist. The body is a great laboratory for practicing deconstruction. We can experience phenomena, rather than the soap opera of our lives that goes on up in the old coconut. “Oh, my knee hurts. What’s gonna happen to me in the future? I’m not going to be able to walk!” We get outside that story and start to see the phenomena in deconstructed form. We start to see the non-self aspect and the *dukkha*, and we see that it’s always changing.

Reggie Ray: The question of the role of the body in meditation assumes there’s meditation and there’s a body. What is it that meditates, though? In a sense, it’s the body that meditates. As Phillip discussed, awareness is not localized in the head. It pervades the body, and when we tap into the fundamental awareness of our person, we are completely contained within our somatic experience. The reason we might ask such a question in our Western culture is that we objectify the body as somehow separate from our awareness, separate from our minds, but that’s incorrect from a Buddhist standpoint. We can rephrase the question as, “Who or what is meditating?” The answer is that our whole being is meditating, and the body is the locale of that awareness. We see that the body is the one and only gateway for the meditative state.

The more we pay attention to the body, the more we discover that the body is at the heart of the mystery of human life. We discover that the body is not this solid entity that we can use for our aims—be that meditation or whatever you choose.

Every year, I teach a program called “Meditating With the Body.” Most people who come to the program are not meditators, but rather people who work with their bodies in various ways. They find that through their Rolfing, massage, or yoga practice, they’ve started to realize that the body leads them into something deeper. It leads them to a state of mind they’ve been looking for their whole life. From the perspective of being spiritual teachers, we could talk about what we consider inauthentic motivations for engaging the body, but I would rather say that all motivations for engaging the body are good ones, because they eventually lead us to a much bigger state of being. The body is not peripheral. Engagement with the body is at the heart of spirituality. It may be at a coarse level at the beginning, but if you go far enough in working with your body, you discover your fundamental being beyond time and space.

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: In our tradition, we often talk about practice from the perspective of the body, the flow of the wind (*prana*), and the arising awareness of the mind. The average person can deal with the body much more easily than working immediately with the flow of wind, or energy, or the subtleties of awareness of the mind. So it's good to start with posture, with a good sitting position, such as the five-point or seven-point posture. The moment somebody is sitting in one of those positions, all the channels and the chakras align, which supports good flow of the wind, which supports awareness. Mind requires much less effort to be in the state of awareness. The role of the body, then, is to help the prana, and the prana helps the mind. If someone wanted to bypass the body and the wind, and try to directly force the mind into achieving sudden awareness, that would be almost impossible.

We also practice a physical yoga, *trulkhor*, with movements designed to open particular chakras and channels, because in those chakras and channels, there are particular forms of prana, which are the direct cause of specific kinds of awareness. Whenever they are open and the winds are flowing better there, it's easier for the mind to be aware. Working with the body can avoid trying to force the mind to be quiet. When you try to tell the mind to sit quiet, it often does the opposite. If you're trying to tell mind what to do, mind never listens. But if you create the right causes and conditions, mind will follow.

Buddhadharma: Isn't *trulkhor* a relatively advanced practice?

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: Some kinds of *trulkhor* are quite subtle, but the overall point of the physical yoga is that it can be easier to work with the body as a support for awareness than to work directly on the mind. Why are so many people interested in yoga? Because it's easy to follow. Of course, it's not necessarily easy to do, but it's much easier than dealing with a lot of complicated stages of mind practices. The popularity of yoga in the West is a wonderful thing because it can become a door to dharma. It can start as an interest in fitness, well-being, and health, and gradually it can become the door to higher understanding. Unfortunately, it can also be just a physical fitness regimen, and its original purpose of supporting awareness is lost.

Cyndi Lee: I agree. For most people it's easier to start with the body. You can feel it. You can touch it.

People come to yoga for a variety of pretty obvious reasons—getting fit, losing weight, quitting smoking, meeting a mate—but across the board they stay for a different reason, and it usually has some relationship to dharma. Yoga is definitely a door to the dharma. In the yoga tradition, the very first two limbs are the *yamas* and the *niyamas*—how you behave in the world and how you interact with other people. After that comes *asana*, the codified physical system of aligning your muscles and bones to promote radiant health, what most people associate with the term “yoga.” The limbs after *asana*—*pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*—are subtler and take us into the meditative realm.

Many people come into yoga feeling stressed out, and come out of yoga less stressed out. Processing takes place. Even when people aren't aware of the four foundations of mindfulness, the experience still happens to a certain degree. It isn't magic, though. People need to be taught how to relate to what they're feeling. For example, how to be aware of the intricacies of the knee pain they're experiencing, as Phillip was describing, rather than being caught up in their story line about it.

Phillip Moffitt: At Spirit Rock, we just finished our first program training yoga teachers to employ mindfulness while they are teaching *asana*. It was very well received, so we'll start another one in 2010. *Asana* is seen as spiritual practice from the beginning. If yoga teachers' *asana* practice starts to be informed by awareness, they'll share that with their students. In turn, the students will have a larger orientation from the beginning. I agree with Rinpoche's and

Cyndi's descriptions of the original conception of asana practice as being about the energetic level of experience. In fact, every asana is actually a form of meditation. There is a one-pointedness to every single asana, and if you find that one-pointedness within the practice, it changes the practice. Even if you're not informed about a particular map of how energy moves in the body, you discover blockages, and the awareness itself starts to open up the channels.

Cyndi Lee: I would add that there is not only the one-pointedness of the asana—what I would call the shamatha aspect—but also panoramic awareness. You feel the energetic circuitry in space in a room with other people. It becomes a template for how we are with other people in the world.

Buddhadharma: One of the early instructions many of us received was not to focus or “centralize” on the body. We were told to go beyond thinking of ourselves as our body. How do you understand this teaching in relation to the strong focus on the body you've all been speaking about?

Reggie Ray: When we're instructed not to focus on the body, we're being taught not to focus on our *idea* of the body, the body as we currently experience it. The more you explore your physical body, the more it dissolves into energy, and you realize that even the idea of having a physical body is mistaken. The body is an energetic phenomenon onto which we have superimposed the idea of solidity.

Phillip Moffitt: The body is the way to get into this moment, and to develop a continuity of presence, of being.

Reggie Ray: At a very deep level, we can talk about experiencing the Buddha's body, the three *kayas*. The *nirmanakaya*, or “created body,” is the flesh and blood physical body, but it's understood as pure. The *sambhogakaya*, or “body of enjoyment,” refers to the energetic world, the invisible world of symbol and magic. The *dharmakaya* is the ultimate body, the body of reality itself.

All those *kayas* manifest within the body, so when we talk about not focusing on the body, we are not suggesting that, therefore, spirituality is elsewhere. That just puts you back up in your head. The body is a gateway that is accessible to us right here, right now.

Buddhadharma: How is something as rarified as the *sambhogakaya* and the *dharmakaya* still “body” in the sense that we understand body, as the thing with ears and nose and toes?

Reggie Ray: We have a cultural understanding of what the body is, but we have to realize that lots of different people in different cultures and at different levels of maturation look at the physical body and see very different things. Some look at a body and all they see is physical phenomenon defined by modern biology, but a meditator can look at the body and see that as a conceptual overlay.

What the body actually is, as Phillip said, is a continuous flow of sensations, none of which is solid. At a further level, someone could look at this body and see pure energy. They literally don't see anything physical. An enlightened person would see space. From our literal, modern viewpoint, it sounds very ethereal to talk about the body's energy, but that's actually what the body is for some people. We can deconstruct our ideas of the body as a definitive phenomenon. It isn't one solid, predetermined thing. It's an open field for investigation.

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: In my tradition, we work with body, speech, and mind as three doors. The body is a doorway into the *nirmanakaya*, speech into the *sambhogakaya*, and mind into the *dharmakaya*. If we engage these well, they become gateways to enlightenment, to

buddhahood. If we leave them aside, we will not develop the kayas, the enlightened manifestation. If you don't work at all with the body, for example, you are going to miss the nirmanakaya aspect. I have been teaching about sound and speech as healing, which works with the sambhogakaya aspect.

Buddhadharma: In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha quite quickly takes us to the point of not just being mindful of body as body. He asks us to delve further, to explore its many parts and subparts, the fact of its decay, the fact that it is a bag of guts. What is the benefit of this teaching?

Phillip Moffitt: The teaching you refer to often descends into discussing the repulsiveness of the body, which I think is an unfortunate Victorian choice of words to translate what's in the sutta. With that approach, when you describe the body in terms of its parts, there is a notion of aversion. The Buddha was certainly not teaching aversion. He was, once again, simply teaching deconstruction. You see the body as a collection of sensations, as energetic phenomena.

Reggie Ray: Those teachings about contemplating all the aspects of the body work with the way we hang on to the body as a reference point. They're trying to help us let go of that process of hanging on. This frees the body to be itself. It doesn't deny the body. It doesn't put it down. It just frees it from our grasping and fixation, our trying to use the body as a source of security, which obviously blocks us and locks us up.

Phillip Moffitt: Absolutely. If we grasp one way, it's eternalism. If we grasp the other way, it's nihilism. And neither of those lets the body be what it is.

Buddhadharma: Do people who have stayed with a body discipline a long time begin to let the body be what it is, just by continued exposure to working closely with it?

Reggie Ray: There's a lot of potential experience in working closely with the body, but without some sort of spiritual mentoring we really can't go anywhere. That might be one of the main dilemmas in our culture. So many people are working with the body from so many different angles, but if the spiritual outlook isn't there, the full extent of what's possible in working with the body doesn't come to fruition.

Cyndi Lee: At my studio, people are trained with that kind of orientation. So when they get more advanced, they get more interested in the experience rather than the story line about the experience—what they can and cannot do anymore, for example. Instead, they consider: What am I feeling? What am I experiencing right now? How is it changing? It becomes an immediate meditation in the body. We teach people that kind of immediate attention from day one, but it takes a while for people to sustain intense interest in what's going on with the body at an intimate level.

Buddhadharma: Many people say they experienced a breakthrough in meditation practice when they finally understood the difference between the psychosomatic body, the projection of body, and the body just as it is. Up until that point, they say, meditation instruction seemed more theoretical or therapeutic, but once they encountered real body, their practice became grounded. Is it not, then, vitally important that mindfulness of body be emphasized in meditation instruction to ensure that the rubber meets the road?

Phillip Moffitt: I start guided meditation by saying, Bring attention to the body—not *your* body, *the* body. I'm pointing to a phenomenon occurring right now. I continue by saying we are not judging the body, not comparing the body, not fixing the body. I focus on judging, comparing, and fixing, because those three tend to be our primary relationships with

the body. Do we like our body? How does it compare to our body before, to others' bodies? What's wrong with it that we need to repair?

If you're judging, comparing, and trying to fix your body, you're still in your head, in duality: it's the body you want vs. the body you have. This separation is creating solidity. And it happens on some very subtle levels. If you have a good teacher, one who is grounded in his or her own experience, and can continually bring the student back to their direct experience, then we can trust the dharma to work on the student. So one of my major jobs is to facilitate students becoming present for their own experience, as opposed to saying to them, "This is what you should notice about your experience." At that point, life is teaching them, life is leading them forward.

Buddhadharma: Fixing in general seems to be a big hang up, but that's particularly the case when it comes to the body. I spent an inordinate amount of time using meditation as a tool to try to fix myself. Without success.

Cyndi Lee: That's a big challenge in yoga. You're in downward dog and your hamstrings are too tight and your stomach is too big. Then you hate yourself, blah, blah, blah. But after a while, your hamstrings loosen up. The body is an incredible venue for shifting our paradigm of attachment and aversion. We start out objectifying ourselves, objectifying each other, but as we go on, there's really no problem to be fixed.

Buddhadharma: We've talked about duality, which takes the form of the body–mind split. Is that split something especially pronounced in Western culture, as many have argued, or is it just part of human experience in all times and all places?

Reggie Ray: That's a fundamental question that everybody asks. The thinking mind represents an abstraction from concrete experience. To think about a glass of water is not the same as a glass of water. In Western culture, we take the abstracted image for the reality. We lose touch with our literal experience, but in every culture there's a tendency in that direction. It's particularly pronounced if we persist in identifying the mind as the thinking process, but in the Buddhist tradition the mind isn't the thinking mind. The mind is awareness itself. If we identify the mind as awareness, there is no split and there never was.

Phillip Moffitt: When we start to think of the body in terms of function, which we are prone to do, we separate mind and body. The thinking mind wants the body to function in a certain way. The thinking mind has the abilities of memory and association and planning that it can apply to managing the body. But if you're just present, awareness is manifest in space–time in this moment, and the function of the body becomes secondary. The separation between mind and body arises in the field of awareness, and it is simply form and emptiness. The separation begins and ends there.

We also know from the latest brain science that many of our actions and much of our decision-making have happened before the signal ever gets to the brain, before the rational mind has time to form its reasons. It's one continuous system. Body–mind split? What body–mind split?

Buddhadharma: There can be a lot of pain, discomfort, and loss of ability associated with the body that can make practice difficult, and many people have been known to just give up practice. What kinds of instructions can be helpful for people who are experiencing diminished function?

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: I often hear of people who have had an injury, perhaps even a brain injury, and their ability to meditate is not what it was before. But just because your body has become weaker doesn't mean the mind is unable to practice. In some sense, the mind has the ability to do its own practice regardless of the conditions of the body. That must be

understood. In the end, mind is totally free. It does not depend on the body. We may think, even deep in our consciousness, that if our body is not working well, we are no longer able to practice. We think the body is getting old, so the mind is getting old. Mind is ageless, beyond birth and death. Thinking that whatever happens to body happens to mind, to me, is the biggest problem we have. It's one of the biggest sources of suffering.

Reggie Ray: Our real obstacle is not the particular problems we're having in our body. It's thinking that what goes on in the body ultimately impedes the mind.

Cyndi Lee: I'm honestly not sure about that. What about brain chemistry processes that impede your mental functioning and can cause debilitating conditions like dementia?

Reggie Ray: Keep in mind that we're talking about awareness that is free from conditioning and even free from birth and death. Something that may challenge our thinking mind a great deal, such as physical problems or illness, could actually force us to a much deeper level of meditative realization.

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: Illness and adverse physical conditions affect what we call the moving mind, the thinking mind, the mind that can guide awareness in various directions. But in the end we'll have to give up the thinking mind. It dissolves into space along with everything else, and we're left with pure awareness. Nothing affects pure awareness.

Reggie Ray: I lost several days of sleep recently, and I had to do a bunch of interviews with students. I was so exhausted that my mind wouldn't work. Yet I sat down with them anyway, and the only way I could get through it was to simply rest in a more natural and open state of mind. I remained upright despite feeling on the verge of collapse. It felt like the incapacity forced me to a much deeper awareness of my own mind.

Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche: There is a sleep yoga practice where you don't sleep for three to five days. Then after you finally go to sleep, a teacher or fellow student wakes you up and asks you, "Who are you?" That's a way to introduce you to the natural state.

Phillip Moffitt: When people come to a retreat with an injury or chronic pain, they often say they don't know if they should be there, they're probably going to have to leave, and so forth. In that case, we teach people to be with the experience rather than their preferences. As a result, they find an ease in body awareness that's not based on whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant. There's a sense of well-being in the body that comes from awareness of the body as a grounding force. It can interrupt the way the thinking mind interprets experience. If you continue to do asana even though you're injured, you can discover a wisdom that makes a huge difference. You can leave the reactive state of mind. Yes, it's unpleasant, but it's just unpleasant. That brings a kind of temporary freedom.

Cyndi Lee: I ask people to see if they can distinguish between an interesting sensation and pain. If someone says it's pain, we stop, rewind, and work with it. But we also maintain the notion of "interesting sensation" throughout our yoga path, and you find that even as you get older and older and you have a lot of interesting sensations, you can avoid the big story about them and just note to yourself, "Oh, that's interesting." The instruction for physical obstacles to practice seems to be: first be fully present with the obstacles and then look into them deeply. They may not be obstacles at all.

Buddhadharma: Just sensation.

Reggie Ray: And sensation is aware of itself; there is no outside agent, as my teacher used to say.

Phillip Moffitt: It's just experience. No self is created.

Reggie Ray: All of what we've been talking about, respecting the body, making room for it, and not exiting into mental judgment is what we would call *maitri*, love of our own personhood. And that is the basis for compassion for other people. Working with the body in a deep way is the ground of generating genuine compassion. It's deeply based on acceptance of one's own experience, not just an idea of doing something nice for someone else. With such close attention to what's happening in our experience of being human, it's unavoidable that we're going to take the same attitude toward other people, welcoming, accepting, and being with them in the very same way.



ABOUT PHILLIP MOFFITT

Phillip Moffitt is a member of the Teachers Council at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and the founder and president of the Life Balance Institute. He leads meditation retreats at Spirit Rock and at other Buddhist centers around the United States and Canada. He is the author of *Emotional Chaos to Clarity* and *Dancing with Life: Finding Meaning and Joy in the Face of Suffering*.



ABOUT CYNDI LEE

Founder of the world-renowned OM yoga Center in NYC (1998-2012), Cyndi is known for her contemplative classes and soulful teachings. She is the author of 5 books, including *Yoga Body, Buddha Mind: A Complete Manual for Physical and Spiritual Well-Being* and the New York Times critically acclaimed *May I Be Happy: A Memoir of Love, Yoga, and Changing My Mind*. In 2019 she launched a new online course, "Taking Refuge In Your Body," available from learn.lionsroar.com.



ABOUT GESHE TENZIN WANGYAL RINPOCHE

Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche is a lineage holder of the Bön Dzogchen tradition of Tibet. His is the author of *Spontaneous Creativity: Meditations for Manifesting Your Positive Qualities* (2018).



ABOUT ANNE KLEIN

Anne C. Klein (Rigzin Drolma) is Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University in Houston, Texas, and the founding director of Dawn Mountain Tibetan Temple, Community Center and Research Institute.



ABOUT REGINALD RAY

Reginald A. Ray, Ph.D., was Professor of Buddhist Studies at Naropa University and a teacher-in-residence at the Rocky Mountain Shambhala Center. He is the spiritual director of the Dharma Ocean Foundation and author of *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*.