Embodied Spirituality, Now and Then

BY JORGE N. FERRER

Embodied spirituality has become a buzzword in contemporary spiritual circles, yet the concept has not been dealt with in a thorough manner. What do we really mean when we say that spirituality is "embodied"? Is there a distinct understanding of the body underlying this expression? In practice, what distinguishes "embodied" from "disembodied" spirituality? What are the implications for spiritual practice and spiritual goals—and for our approach to spiritual liberation—of taking embodiment seriously?

Before attempting to answer these questions, two caveats are in order. First, though the following reflections seek to capture essential features of an emerging spiritual ethos in the modern West, by no means do they represent the thinking of every spiritual author and teacher who today uses the term "embodied spirituality." The present account reflects my own standpoint, with its unique perspective and consequent limitations. Second, this essay engages in the task of a "creative interreligious hermeneutics" that not only freely—and admittedly somewhat impetuously—weaves together spiritual threads from different religious traditions, but also at times revisions them in light of modern spiritual understandings. Though this procedure is still considered anathema in mainstream academic circles, I am convinced that only through a critical fusion of past and present global spiritual horizons can we begin stitching a trustworthy tapestry of contemporary embodied spirituality.

What Is Embodied Spirituality?

The expression "embodied spirituality" can rightfully be seen as redundant and perhaps even hollow. After all, is not all human spirituality "embodied" insofar as it necessarily transpires in the bodies of men and women? Proponents of embodied spiritual practice, however, tell us that important trends of past and present spiritualities are "disembodied." But what does "disembodied" mean in this context?

In light of our spiritual history, I suggest that "disembodied" does not denote that the body and its primary energies were ignored in religious practice—they definitely were
not—but rather that they were not considered legitimate or reliable sources of spiritual 
insight in their own right. In other words, body and instinct have not generally been 
regarded as capable of collaborating as equals with soul, mind, and consciousness in the 
attainment of spiritual liberation. Many religious traditions believed that the body and 
the primary world (and aspects of the heart, such as certain passions) were actually a 
hindrance to spiritual flourishing—a view that often led to the repression, regulation, 
or transformation of these worlds in the service of the “higher” goals of a spiritualized 
consciousness. This is why disembodied spirituality often crystallized in a “heart-
chakra-up” spiritual life that was based preeminently in the mental and/or emotional 
access to transcendent consciousness and that tended to overlook spiritual sources im-
manent in the body, nature, and matter.

Embodied spirituality, in contrast, views all human dimensions—body, vital world, 
heart, mind, and consciousness—as equal partners in bringing the self, community, and 
the world into a fuller alignment with the Mystery out of which everything arises. With 
this approach, the engagement of the body and its vital/primary energies are crucial for 
not only a thorough spiritual transformation, but also the creative exploration of ex-
panded forms of spiritual freedom. The consecration of the whole person leads natural-
ly to the cultivation of a “full-chakra” spirituality that seeks to make all human attributes 
permeable to the presence of both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies. This 
does not mean that embodied spirituality ignores the need to emancipate body and inst-
inct from possible alienating tendencies; rather, it means that all human dimensions— 
not just somatic and primary ones—are recognized to be not only possibly alienated, but 
equally capable of sharing freely in the unfolding life of the Mystery here on earth.

The contrast between sublimation and integration can help to clarify this distinction. 
In sublimation, the energy of one human dimension is used to amplify, expand, or trans-
form the faculties of another dimension. This is the case, for example, when a celibate 
monk sublimes sexual desire to increase the devotional love of the heart, or when a 
tantric practitioner uses sexual energies as fuel to catapult consciousness into disembod-
ed or even trans-human states of being. In contrast, the integration of two human dimen-
sions entails a mutual transformation of their essential energies. For example, the 
integration of consciousness and the vital world makes the former more embodied, vital-
ized, and even eroticized, and grants the latter an intelligent evolutionary direction beyond 
its biologically driven instincts. Sublimation is a mark of disembodied spirituality, and in-
tegration is a goal of embodied spirituality. This is not to say, of course, that sublimation 
has no place in embodied spiritual practice. The sublimation of certain energies may be 
necessary—even crucial—at specific junctures or for certain individual dispositions. To 
turn sublimation into a permanent goal, however, is a fast lane to disembodied spirituality.

A more subtle type of disembodied orientation sees spiritual life as emerging exclu-
sively from the interaction of our immediate present experience and transcendent 
sources of consciousness. In this context, spiritual practice is aimed either at accessing 
such overriding realities or at bringing such spiritual energies down to earth to transfig-
ure human nature and/or the world. The shortcoming of this understanding is that it 
ignores the existence of a second spiritual pole—immanent spiritual life—that is inti-
mately connected to the vital world and stores the most generative power of Spirit. To 
overlook this spiritual source leads practitioners—even those concerned with bodily 
transformation—to neglect the significance of the vital world for a creative spirituality, 
as well as to seek to transcend or sublimate their sexual energies. A fully embodied spirit-
uality emerges from the creative interplay of both immanent and transcendent spiritual 
energies in individuals who embrace the fullness of human experience while 
remaining firmly grounded in body and earth.

To be sure, religious attitudes toward the human body have been profoundly am-
biguous, with the body being regarded as a source of bondage and defilement on the 
one hand, and as the locus of spiritual revelation and divinization on the other. Our 
religious history houses tendencies that fall along a continuum of disembodied to embod-
ied goals and practices. Examples of disembodied trends include the asceticism of Brahmanism, Jainism, monastic Christianity, early Taoism, and early Sufism. Many Hindu schools view the body as unreal (mithya) and the world as illusion (maya). Early Buddhist accounts describe the body as a repulsive source of suffering, nirvana as extinction of bodily senses and desires, and “final nirvana” (parinirvana) as attainable only after death. Christianity often viewed the flesh as the source of evil and the resurrected body as asexual. The Safed Kabbalists were obsessed with the sinfulness of masturbation and nocturnal emissions.

Likewise, examples of embodied trends include the Zoroastrian view of the body as part of human ultimate nature; the biblical account of the human being as made in the “image of God” (Genesis); the tantric affirmation of the non-duality of sensual desire and awakening; the early Christian emphasis on incarnation (“the Word became flesh”); the goal of “attaining Buddhahood in this very body” (sokushin jobutsu) of Shingon Buddhism; the Jewish religious enjoyment of all bodily needs and appetites in the sabbath; the radical embrace of sensuality in the Sufi poetry of Rumi or Hafez; and the Judeo-Christian advocacy for social engagement and justice in the spiritual transformation of the world, among many others.

Many apparently embodied religious orientations, however, conceal highly ambivalent views toward sensuality and the physical body. For example, Taoism did not generally value the physical body in itself, but as a dwelling place for the gods. Also, whereas the Jewish sabbath is a day for the consecration of sexual intercourse between husband and wife, many traditional teachings (e.g., the Lggeret ha-Kodesh) prescribed the need to engage in such union without pleasure or passion, as it was supposedly carried out in the orchard before the first sin. What is more, much of the Vajrayana Buddhist appreciation of the “gross” physical body as a facilitator of enlightenment lay in considering it the foundation of a more real, nonphysical “astral” or “rainbow” body. Though certain religious schools generated spiritual goals more inclusive of embodiment, a fully embodied spirituality that engages all human attributes in co-creative interaction with both immanent and transcendent spiritual sources was, and continues to be, an extremely rare pearl.

An examination of all the variables behind the tendency toward disembodied spirituality goes beyond the scope of this essay, but I would like to mention at least one possible underlying reason: The inhibition of the primary dimensions of the person may have been necessary at certain historical junctures to allow the emergence and maturation of the values of the human heart and consciousness. Specifically, this inhibition may have been essential to avoid the reabsorption of a still relatively weak emerging self-consciousness into the stronger presence that a more instinctively driven energy once had in human collectivities. In the context of religious praxis, this may be connected to the widespread consideration of certain human qualities as being spiritually more “correct” or wholesome than others, for instance: equanimity over intense passions, transcendence over sensuous embodiment, chastity or strictly regulated sexual practice over open-ended sensual exploration, and so forth. What may characterize our present moment, however, is the possibility of reconnecting all these human potentials in an integrated way. In other words, having developed self-reflective consciousness and the subtle dimensions of the heart, it may be the moment to reappropriate and integrate the more primary and instinctive dimensions of human nature into a fully embodied spiritual life.

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, needs and desires, lights and shadows, 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 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 rather to its "becoming" 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.

**Body as source of spiritual insight:** The body is a divine revelation that can offer spiritual understanding, discrimination, and wisdom. Bodily sensations, for example, are foundational stepping-stones in the embodied transformation of Spirit's creative energies through each human life. As the Buddha said, "Everything that arises in the mind starts flowing with a sensation in the body." 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 (*satori*). Being physical itself, the body can reveal the ultimate meaning of incarnated life. The body's answer to this mystery is not given in the form of any grand metaphysical vision, but gracefully granted through states of being that render life naturally meaningful and profound. The meaning of life is not something to be discerned intellectually by the mind, but something to be felt in the depths of the 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*). All these perceptions portray the human body as mirroring and containing the innermost structure of both the entire universe and the ultimate creative principle. 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 nature and inner dynamics of the Divine. 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 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. Because the body is denser in nature than the emotional, mental, and conscious worlds, changes taking place in it are more lasting and permanent. 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.

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**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 toward 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—i.e., 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 most individuals understand the conscious mind as the seat of their sense of identity, an exclusive liberation of consciousness can be deceptive because it allows us to believe that we are fully free when, in fact, essential dimensions of ourselves are underdeveloped or alienated. Embracing an "integral bodhisattva vow" is not returning 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: Embodied spirituality explores the development of *kaya sadhanas* ("realization through the body") 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 others. Modern embodied spirituality rescues the spiritual significance not only of the body but also of physical contact. For example, 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. Some ancient Indian texts state that yoga postures (*asanas*) first emerged spontaneously from within the body guided by the free flow of its vital energy (*prana*).

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 the 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. 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. Re-sacralization of sexuality and sensuous pleasure: Sexuality and the vital world are the first "soils" for the organization and creative development of immanent Spirit in human reality. That is why it is so important that sexuality be lived as a sacred terrain 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.

Because of its captivating effect on human consciousness and the ego, 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 (continued on page 63)
privileged and unprivileged minorities, of acceptable and forbidden speech to describe each. As Zionism was equated with racism at Durban, defining the existence of an Israeli state as race oppression, so the impoverished, excluded, torchbearing young Muslim becomes equated by the liberal media with the virtuous victim. Ultimately he finds the liberal media more disgusting than rampaging young Muslims. By characterizing the riots as the result of racism and exclusion rather than wanton savagery manipulated by an Islamic master, the media elite, including many Jews, are in Finkelkraut's view complicit in the ongoing destruction of Western democracy itself.

"When an Arab torches a school, it's rebellion," Finkelkraut told Ha'aretz. "When a white guy does it, it's fascism. I'm 'color blind.' Evil is evil, no matter what color it is. And this evil, for the Jew that I am, is completely intolerable." Alain Finkelkraut chooses his words carefully. When he uses words like "pogrom" or "evil" to characterize France's ghetto street violence, he understands precisely the resonance of his speech. Endorsing a law passed in the National Assembly last year requiring schools to teach the benefits of French colonialism on its overseas subjects, he knew exactly to whom he was speaking. "We don't teach anymore that the colonial project also sought to educate, to bring civilization to the savages," he said (emphasis added). It was the kind of sentence nobody but a Ku Klux Klan member could have said in the United States.

Watching on our television screens the burning of European embassies by mobs of Muslims enraged over a set of newspaper cartoons mocking Mohammed, it would be easy for us to nod in agreement with Finkelkraut. That has surely been the dominant message of Fox, CNN, and even much of the liberal media. Yet close observers of this winter of Muslim discontent, witnesses who walk the streets of those unhappy towns and neighborhoods across the Middle East, report a rather different account. Whether in Gaza, Beirut, or Tehran, where the most intense assaults took place, a much deeper conflict was already underway over the fate of each people's concrete, material future. Just as the burning of South Central Los Angeles in 1991 was only peripherally about a hard luck victim named Rodney King, so too is it an easy solipsism for Finkelkraut and the like to read into the autumn riots or the winter assaults an unyielding war of civilizations.

For the moment they are still a relative minority among French intellectuals, but their polemics claim more and more attention in the media. As Daniel Lindenberg, a historian and the author of Return to Order, said recently, "The tragedy is that now in France you've got Dieudonné [an openly anti-white, anti-Jewish French Caribbean comic] on one side and Finkelkraut on the other. These people are in the process of pitting each community against the other. Worse: they are creating the divisions."

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**Embodied Spirituality, Then and Now**

(continued from page 45) magnetic force of the sexual drive can be seen as attracting consciousness to matter, facilitating both its embodiment 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:** Most religious traditions are "reproductive" in that their practices aim to replicate either the enlightenment of their founder (e.g., the awakening of the Buddha) or the state of salvation described in purportedly revealed scriptures (e.g., the moksa of the Vedas). Spiritual creativity was then regulated by such predetermined unequivocal goals. Embodied spirituality, in contrast, seeks to cocreate 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, 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.

6. **Grounded spiritual visions:** As we have seen, most spiritual traditions posit the existence of an isomorphism between human beings, 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, the more complete his or her knowledge will be. This "completion" should not be understood quantitatively but rather in a qualitative sense. The more human dimensions that 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 nature of the Mystery will be our knowledge.

It is likely that many past and present spiritual visions are to some extent the product of dissociated ways of knowing. For example, spiritual visions that hold that body and world are ultimately illusory (or lower, or impure, or a hindrance 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 ultimately illusory or defective. However, 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

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EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY, THEN AND NOW

sacred realities that are recognized as crucial for human and cosmic spiritual evolution.

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 we could have incarnated in more subtle planes 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. Though it may be valuable at times to go beyond our embodied existence in order to access essential dimensions of our lenity, to turn this move into a permanent spiritual modus operandi can easily create dissociations in one’s spiritual life.

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. 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, cocreate 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.

8. Re-sacralization 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. Nature is then discerned as an organic embodiment of the Mystery. To sense our physical surroundings as intrinsically sacred offers natural resources for an ecologically grounded spiritual life.

One does not need to hold a spiritual world view to recognize the miracle of the natural world. 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. The earth is the only place in the known cosmos where consciousness and matter coexist and can achieve a gradual integration through participating sentient beings. The inability to perceive nature as paradise is simply a consequence of our collective condition of arrested incarnation.

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 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 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.”

Ultimately, embodied spirituality seeks to catalyze the emergence of complete human beings—beings who, while remaining rooted in their bodies, earth, and immanent spiritual life, have made all their attributes permeable to transcendent spiritual energies, and who cooperate in solidarity with others in the spiritual transformation of self, community, and world. In short, a complete human being is firmly grounded in Spirit—Within, fully open to Spirit—Beyond, and in transformative communion with Spirit—In Between.

Perhaps as human beings gradually embody both transcendent and immanent spiritual energies—a twofold incarnation, so to speak—they will realize that it is here, in this plane of concrete physical reality, that the cutting edge of spiritual transformation and evolution is taking place. For then the planet earth may gradually turn into an embodied heaven, a perhaps unique place in the cosmos where beings can learn to express and receive embodied love, in all its forms.

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64 TIKKUN www.tikkun.org May/June 2006

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