

# EMBODIMENT WITHOUT BODY

BY MOLLY KENNY, MS-CCC



In *Radical Acceptance*, Tara Brach, PhD, writes, “Bringing radical acceptance into our lives starts at this most basic level—becoming aware of the sensations that are continually taking place in our physical being.... We experience our lives through our bodies whether we are aware of it or not.”

As a Yoga practitioner, teacher, and therapist, I would have normally agreed wholeheartedly with that passage. However, when I read it for the first time, I happened to be working with a

young man who had been shot in Iraq. He had been flown home to face his new life with no ability to move his body or feel any sensation below the neck. He needed a ventilator to breathe. How was he to bring “radical acceptance” into his life? Indeed, how was he to experience his life now, if not through his body?

I first met this young man, Darrin, through one of my Yoga students at the Samarya Center, in Seattle, Washington. She had learned about Darrin from her neighbor, Darrin’s aunt. In their conversations, Darrin’s aunt mentioned that he was open to and

ready for an alternative to the careful medical management he was receiving at the VA Hospital. Darrin was having panic attacks that were slowing his progress by interfering with some of his therapies. My student thought of me and, in a leap of faith, gave Darrin’s aunt my number. Within a week, I had begun a 10-week journey with Darrin, bringing Yoga to him at bedside.

I was never afraid that I could not help Darrin; I just didn’t know exactly how I would. Although I had worked with many people in extremely difficult places in their lives, including people with progressive neurological diseases, people dying from AIDS, and parents who had lost their babies to sudden illness, I had never worked with someone who was not able to be “in their body” at all. This new situation challenged much of what I had come to rely on in my work: an ability to use the body as a gateway.

For example, a person might not want to talk about the circumstances of a sad event at the beginning of a session, but after moving, becomes quite willing. I used to be fond of saying, “The mind and the mouth lie; the breath and the body don’t.” People say they are feeling one way, but in fact are feeling another. If we are able to tune in to the messages of the person’s body and the breath, we will usually be able to read the feelings behind the words.

What then, if the person could not be in touch with his body? If I could not work with the body, and I could not really work with breath, what could I work with? Where did I begin? I now had an opportunity to look at Integrated Movement Therapy (IMT), the

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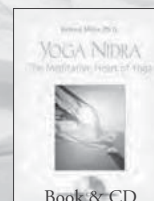
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therapy modality I have developed, practiced, and taught over the years, through a new lens: one in which the body and the breath were secondary, and the mind and heart were primary.

IMT is based on the Yogic view of health, healing, and connection to a divine spirit. Yoga is a process of undoing our sense of separateness and coming home to connection with God, with ourselves, with each other, with our shared sense of suffering and joy—and in this place, experiencing a deep sense of well-being. That is Yoga. Now was the time to really explore this idea of connection as the primary focus of my therapy.

We began with talking. I told Darrin that I saw him as a man, a spark of life, and not as his injury. I told him that I knew I could help him if he guided me by honestly telling me what he was feeling, and what he was hoping to feel in each of our sessions. We began with attention to the breath, using the rhythmic whooshing sound of the ventilator as a point of focus. Darrin could not control his breath, but he could become one with it, instead of regarding it as a threatening outsider. Next, we began to practice rotations of consciousness, with Darrin bringing awareness to different areas of his body that he could no longer feel, but could still perceive.

We talked and joked about lots of things: Yoga philosophy, family, his condition, but most importantly, the space was always open for Darrin to talk about his life and death. On our sixth session, Darrin told me that he had asked to be removed from his ventilator. He wanted to practice one specific meditation until that day came. This meditation focused on the rarefaction of the physical, energetic, and mental/emotional bodies, until all that remained was a tiny spark of light representing consciousness itself, “infinite freedom.” We referred to this state as a firefly. After our sessions, Darrin’s wife would ask him what we had done together. Darrin

would answer, with his wry smile, “I left my body; I became a firefly.” Soon she also wanted to participate in the meditation.

On at least one occasion, Darrin’s ventilator released a small air leak, setting off an alarm and bringing a flood of medical personnel into the room. Darrin and his wife would simply ask me to wait; we would keep the meditation music on and silently wait for the situation to be resolved. As soon as the respiratory therapists and nurses left, we would simply pick up where we left off and continue in this state of spaciousness and fearlessness. When in these meditations, we were in the ultimate state of radical acceptance, one in which there was nothing to let go of and nothing to hold on to. When we relinquished our connection to the body and its sensations, we were most able to connect directly to spirit.

On our last session together, Darrin entered the meditation deeply. As I was preparing to leave, I placed my hands on his head and thanked him for the honor of being with him through this experience. He opened his eyes and said good-bye. He told me that he didn’t know what it was that brought us together, but that he had benefited greatly from our sessions and was not afraid to die. He told me he would see me around, “but not too soon.” I asked him if I could embrace him, and he laughed and said yes. The last word Darrin said to me was “peace.”

Darrin died on September 7, 2007, peacefully and in full awareness of himself as both form and consciousness. □

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