

YOGA:

Embodiment Without Body

by Molly Lannon Kenny, MS-CCC

Tara Brach, PhD., writes in *Radical Acceptance*, "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 longtime 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 at the C-2 level and was flown home to face his new life with no ability to move his body or feel any sensation below the neck. How then, was he to bring Radical Acceptance into his life? Indeed, how was he to experience his life now?

I first met this young man through one of my yoga students who was aware of Integrated Movement Therapy® (IMT®), the yoga based therapy method developed and practiced at The Samarya Center, in Seattle, Washington. She had learned about Darrin from a neighbor who happened to be his aunt. In their conversations, Darrin's aunt mentioned that Darrin was open to and ready for an alternative to the careful exclusive medical management he was receiving at the VA Hospital. She stated that 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 on a ten 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, parents who had lost their tiny babies to sudden illness, and many others, 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, is often 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. "We experience our lives through our bodies whether we are aware of it or not."

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 the therapy modality I had 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, instead of the other way around.

IMT® is based in the yogic view of health, healing and connection to a divine spirit. Yoga itself 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 just 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 6th session, Darrin told me that he had asked to be removed from his ventilator, and that he wanted to practice one specific meditation until that day came. This meditation focused on the rarefication of the physical, energetic and mental/emotional bodies, until all that remained was a tiny spark of light representing consciousness itself; "infinite freedom." It seemed as if, 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. As if when we relinquished our connection to the body and its sensations, we were most able to connect directly to spirit.

In fact, we experience our lives through all possible avenues of connection and sensation. These include our bodies and minds and eyes and energies and thoughts and things far beyond our understanding. We must develop our ability to become aware of ourselves, on as many different levels and as deeply as we possibly can to fully experience life. Life shifts its shape and forms new energies to meet the avenues we present it with. It is through this process that we are able to fully embody our own experience; to fully practice and maybe, attain yoga.

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