

What Does It Mean to Live a Fully Embodied Spiritual Life?

*Jorge N. Ferrer*¹

California Institute of Integral Studies
San Francisco, CA, USA

This essay discusses the meaning of embodied spirituality—based on the integration of all human attributes, including the body and sexuality—and contrasts it with the disembodied spirituality—based on dissociation and/or sublimation—prevailing in human religious history. It then describes what it means to approach the body as a living partner with which to co-create one's spiritual life, and outlines ten features of a fully embodied spirituality. The article concludes with some reflections about the past, present, and potential future of embodied spirituality.

For in him the whole fullness of divinity dwells bodily. (Colossians 2:9)

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? What distinguishes “embodied” from “disembodied” spirituality in practice? What are the implications for spiritual practice and spiritual goals—and for our very 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 I claim that they represent the thinking of every spiritual author and teacher who today uses the term “embodied spirituality.” It should be obvious that some authors may focus on or accept only some of these features, and that the following account inevitably 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 at times revises 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?

In a way, the expression “embodied spirituality” can be rightfully seen as redundant and perhaps even hollow. After all, is not all human spirituality “embodied” insofar as it necessarily transpires in and through embodied 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 vital/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 heart, mind, and consciousness in the attainment of spiritual realization and liberation. What is more, many religious traditions and schools 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 at 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 immanent in the body, nature, and matter.

Embodied spirituality, in contrast, views all human dimensions—body, vital, heart, mind, and consciousness—as equal partners in bringing self, community, and world into a fuller alignment with the Mystery out of which everything arises (Ferrer, 2002, 2008). Far from being an obstacle, this approach sees the engagement of the body and its vital/primary energies as crucial for not only a thorough spiritual transformation, but also the creative exploration of expanded forms of spiritual freedom. The consecration of the whole person leads naturally 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 instinct 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 also 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 transform the faculties of another dimension. This is the case, for example, when a celibate monk sublimates sexual desire as a catalyst for spiritual breakthrough or to increase the devotional love of the heart, or when a tantric practitioner uses vital/sexual energies as fuel to catapult consciousness into disembodied, transcendent, or even transhuman states of being. In contrast, the *integration* of two human dimensions entails a mutual transformation, or “sacred marriage,” of their essential energies. For example, the integration of consciousness and the vital world makes the former more embodied, vitalized, and even eroticized, and grants the latter an intelligent evolutionary direction beyond its biologically driven instincts. Roughly speaking, we could say that sublimation is a mark of disembodied spirituality, and integration is a goal of embodied spirituality. This is not to say, of course, that sublimation has no place in embodied spiritual practice. The spiritual path is intricate and multifaceted, and 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 or energetic dynamic, however, is a fast lane to disembodied spirituality.

In addition to spiritualities that blatantly devalue body and world, a more subtle type of disembodied orientation sees spiritual life as emerging exclusively from the

interaction of our immediate present experience and transcendent sources of consciousness (cf. Heron, 1998). In this context, spiritual practice is aimed either at accessing such overriding realities (“ascent” paths, such as classic Neoplatonic mysticism) or at bringing such spiritual energies down to earth to transfigure human nature and/or the world (“descent” paths, such as Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga). The shortcoming of this “monopolar” understanding is that it ignores the existence of a second spiritual pole—immanent spiritual life—that, as I elaborate below, is intimately 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 spirituality, I suggest, emerges from the creative interplay of both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies in complete 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 ambivalent, with the body being regarded as a source of bondage, sinfulness, 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 embodied goals and practices. Examples of disembodied trends include the asceticism of Brahmanism, Jainism, Buddhism, monastic Christianity, early Taoism, or early Sufism (Bhagat, 1976; Wimbush & Valantasi, 1995); Hindu views of the body as unreal (*mithya*) and the world as illusion (*maya*) (Nelson, 1998); Advaita Vedanta’s consideration of the “bodiless liberation” (*videhamukti*) achievable only after death as “higher” than a “living liberation” (*jivanmukti*) inexorably tainted by bodily karma (Fort, 1998); early Buddhist accounts of the body as a repulsive source of suffering, of nirvana as extinction of bodily senses and desires, and of “final nirvana” (*parinirvana*) as attainable only after death (Collins, 1998); the Christian view of the flesh as the source of evil and of the resurrected body as asexual (Bynum, 1995); the “isolation” (*kaivalya*) of pure consciousness from body and world in Samkhya-Yoga (Larson, 1969); the tantric transmutation of sexual energy to attain union with the divine in Kashmir Saivism (Mishra, 1993) or to be attuned to the creative flow of the Tao in Taoist self-cultivation (Yasuo, 1993); the Safed Kabbalists’ obsession with the sinfulness of

masturbation and nocturnal emissions (Biale, 1992) or the Lurianic repudiation of the body as “preventing man from [achieving] perfection of his soul” (cited in Fine, 1992, p. 131); the Islamic consideration of the hereafter (*al-akhira*) as being immeasurably more valuable than the physical world (*al-dunya*) (Winter, 1995); and the Visistadvaita Vedanta’s claim that complete liberation entails the total cessation of embodiment (Skoog, 1996).

Likewise, examples of embodied trends include the Zoroastrian view of the body as part of human ultimate nature (A. Williams, 1997); the Biblical account of the human being as made in the “image of God” (*Genesis*; Jónsson, 1988); the tantric affirmation of the nonduality of sensual desire and awakening (Faure, 1998); the early Christian emphasis on incarnation (“the Word became flesh”; Barnhart, 2008); the goal of “attaining Buddhahood in this very body” (*sokushin jobutsu*) of Shingon Buddhism (Kasulis, 1990); the Jewish religious enjoyment of all bodily needs and appetites in the *Sabbath* (Westheimer & Mark, 1995); the radical embrace of sensuality in the Sufi poetry of Rumi or Hafiz (Barks, 2002; Pourafzal & Montgomery, 1998); the Taoist vision of the body as a symbolic container of the secrets of the entire universe (Saso, 1997); the somatic connection to immanent spiritual sources in many indigenous spiritualities (e.g., Lawlor, 1991); Soto Zen’s insistence on the need to surrender the mind to the body in order to reach enlightenment (Yasuo, 1987); the Islamic esoteric saying of the Shi’ite Imams, “Our spirits are our bodies and our bodies our spirits” (*arwahuna ajsaduna wa ajsaduna arwahuna*; Galian, 2003); and the long-standing Judeo-Christian advocacy for social engagement and justice in the spiritual transformation of the world (e.g., Forest, 1993; Heschel, 1996), 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 only because it was believed to be a dwelling place for the gods; and Taoist sexual practices often involved rigorous self-restraint, inhibitory rules, and a depersonalization of sexual relationships that disdained the cultivation of mutual love among individuals (Clarke, 2000; Schipper, 1994). Also, whereas the Jewish *Sabbath* is a day for the consecration of sexual intercourse between husband and wife, many traditional teachings (e.g., the *Iggeret 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 (Biale, 1992).

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 body” or “rainbow body” (P. Williams, 1997). In a similar fashion, Hindu tantra regarded body and world as real, but some of its rituals of identification with the cosmos entailed the purification and visualized destruction of the “impure” physical body to catalyze the emergence of a subtle or divine body from the very ashes of corporeality (see, for example, the *Jayakhya Samhita* of Tantric Vaisnavism; Flood, 2000). In short, though certain religious schools generated spiritual goals more inclusive of embodiment, in living practice a fully embodied spirituality that engages the participation of all human attributes in co-creative interaction with both immanent and transcendent spiritual sources was, and continues to be, an extremely rare pearl to find (Ferrer, 2008; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008a).

An examination of the numerous historical and contextual variables behind the tendency toward disembodied spirituality goes beyond the scope of this essay, but I would like to mention at least a possible underlying reason (see Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2004). The frequent inhibition of the primary dimensions of the person—somatic, instinctive, sexual, and certain aspects of the emotional—may have been necessary at certain historical junctures to allow the emergence and maturation of the values of the human heart and consciousness. More specifically, this inhibition may have been essential to avoid the reabsorption of a still relatively weak emerging self-consciousness and its values 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. Let us now explore the distinctive understanding of the human body implicit in embodied spirituality.

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, its needs and desires, its lights and shadows, its 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 our home, 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 to its “becoming” flesh: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh” [John 1:1, 14]. 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*. Perhaps paradoxically, a complete incarnation can bring a peaceful and fulfilling death because we can then depart from this material existence with a profoundly felt sense of having accomplished one of the most essential purposes in being born into the world.

Body as source of spiritual insight: The body is a divine revelation that can offer spiritual understanding, discrimination, and wisdom. First, the body is the uterus for the conception and gestation of genuine spiritual knowledge. Bodily sensations, for example, are foundational stepping-stones in the embodied transformation of Spirit’s creative energies through each human life. In the absence of severe blockages or dissociations, this creative energy is somatically transformed into impulses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, insights,

visions, and, ultimately, contemplative revelations. As the Buddha famously said, “Everything that arises in the mind starts flowing with a sensation on the body” (Goenka, 1998, p. 26).

Furthermore, in listening deeply to the body we realize that physical sensations and impulses can also be genuine sources of spiritual insight (see Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005; Osterhold, Husserl, & Nicol, 2007). In certain Zen schools, for example, bodily actions constitute crucial tests of spiritual realization and are seen as the ultimate verification of sudden illumination, or *satori* (Faure, 1993). The epistemological relevance of embodiment in spiritual matters was also passionately asserted by Nikos Kazantzakis (1965):

Within me even the most metaphysical problem takes on a warm physical body which smells of sea, soil, and human sweat. The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand—when I can smell, see, touch. (p. 43)

Perhaps even more important, the body is the human dimension that can reveal the ultimate meaning of incarnated life. Being physical itself, the body stores within its depths the answer to the mystery of material existence. The body’s answer to this conundrum is not given in the form of any grand metaphysical vision or Theory of Everything, but gracefully granted through states of being that render life naturally profound and meaningful. In other words, the meaning of life is not something to be discerned and known intellectually by the mind, but to be felt in the depths of our 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” (Faivre, 1994); the Platonic, Taoist, Islamic, Kabbalistic, and tantric understanding of “the person as microcosm of the macrocosm” (e.g., see Chittick, 1994; Faure, 1998; Overzee, 1992; Saso, 1997; Shokek, 2001; Wayman, 1982); and the Biblical view of the human being made “in the image of God” (*imago Dei*) (Jónsson, 1988). For the Bauls of Bengal, the understanding of the body as the microcosm of the universe (*bhandal/bramanda*) entails the belief that the divine dwells physically within the human body (McDaniel, 1992). The Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1968) put it this way: “My matter is not a *part* of the Universe that I possess *totaliter*; it is the *totality* of the Universe possessed by me *partialiter*” (p. 12).

All these perceptions portray an image of the human body as mirroring and containing the innermost structure of both the entire universe and the ultimate creative principle. In a number of traditions, 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 dynamics of the Divine—a pursuit that was perhaps most explicitly described in Kabbalistic theurgical mysticism (Lancaster, 2008). 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 material 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. Given that the body is denser in nature than the emotional, mental, and conscious worlds, changes taking place in it are more lasting and permanent. In other words, 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.

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 towards 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 (2001) 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 (pp. 942 and following pages). This recognition suggests the need to expand the traditional Mahayana Buddhist *bodhisattva* vow—that is, 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 (Ferrer, 2007). Since for most individuals the conscious mind is the seat of their sense of identity, an exclusive liberation of consciousness can be deceptive insofar as we can believe that we are fully free when, in fact, essential dimensions of ourselves are underdeveloped, alienated, or in bondage. Needless to say, to embrace an integral *bodhisattva* vow is not a return 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:** Although their actual practices and fruits remain obscure in the available literature, the Hindu sect of the Bauls of Bengal coined the term *kaya sadhana* to refer to a “realization through the body” (McDaniel, 1992). Embodied spirituality explores the development of *kaya sadhanas* 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 other practitioners. Modern embodied spirituality rescues the spiritual significance not only of the body but also of physical contact. Due to their sequential emergence in human development—from soma to instinct to heart to mind—each dimension grows by taking root in the previous ones, with the body thereby becoming the natural doorway to the deepest levels of the rest of human dimensions. Therefore, the practice of contemplative physical contact in a context of relational mindfulness and spiritual aspiration can have a profound transformative power (see Ferrer, 2003).

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. Interestingly, some ancient Indian texts state that yoga postures (*asanas*) first emerged spontaneously from within the body and were guided by the free flow of its vital energy (*prana*) (Sovatsky, 1994). A creative indwelling spiritual life resides within the body—an intelligent vital dynamism that it is waiting to emerge to orchestrate the unfolding of our becoming fully human.

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 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. Bodyfulness reintegrates in the human being a lost somatic capability that is present in panthers, tigers, and other “big cats” of the jungle, who can be extraordinarily aware without intentionally attempting to be so. 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 (Satprem, 1982).

4. *Resacralization of sexuality and sensuous pleasure:* Whereas our mind and consciousness constitute a natural bridge to transcendent awareness, our body and its primary energies constitute a natural bridge to immanent spiritual life. Immanent life is spiritual *prima materia*—that is, spiritual energy in a state of transformation, still not actualized, saturated with potentials and possibilities, and the source of genuine innovation and creativity at all levels. Sexuality and the vital world are the first soils for the organization and creative development of immanent Spirit in human reality. This is why it is so important that sexuality be lived as a sacred soil 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.

Due to its captivating effect on human consciousness and the egoic personality, 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 magnetic force of the sexual drive can be seen as attracting consciousness to matter, facilitating both its embodiment and grounding in the world 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 (for a discussion of the implications of this integration for intimate relationships, see Ferrer, 2007).

5. *The urge to create:* In *Cosmos and History*, Mircea Eliade (1982) makes a compelling case for the “re-enactive” nature of many religious practices and rituals, for example, in their attempt to replicate cosmogonic actions and events. Expanding this account, we could say that most religious traditions are “reproductive” insofar as their practices aim to not only ritually reenact mythical motives, but also replicate the enlightenment of their founder (e.g., the awakening of the Buddha) or attain the state of salvation or freedom described in allegedly revealed scriptures (e.g., the *moksa* of the Vedas). Although disagreements about the exact nature of such states and the most effective methods to attain them abounded in the historical development of religious practices and ideas—naturally leading to rich creative developments within the traditions—spiritual inquiry was regulated (and arguably constrained) by such predetermined unequivocal goals (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b).

Embodied spirituality, in contrast, seeks to co-create 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 (e.g., specific cosmological motifs, archetypal configurations, mystical visions and states, etc.), 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.

Although many variables were clearly at play, the connection between vital/primary energies and spiritual innovation may help to explain, first, why human spirituality and mysticism have been to a great extent “conservative”; that is, heretic mystics are the exception to the rule, and most mystics firmly conformed to accepted doctrines and canonical scriptures (see, e.g., Katz, 1983); and second, why many spiritual traditions strictly regulated sexual behavior, and often repressed or even proscribed the creative exploration of sensual desire (see, e.g., Cohen, 1994; Faure, 1998; Feuerstein, 1998;

Weiser-Hanks, 2000). I am not proposing that religious traditions regulated or restricted sexual activity *deliberately* to hinder spiritual creativity and maintain the status quo of their doctrines. In my reading, all evidence seems to point to other social, cultural, moral, and doctrinal factors (see, for example, Brown, 1988; Parrinder, 1980). What I am suggesting, in contrast, is that the social and moral regulation of sexuality may have had an unexpected debilitating impact on human spiritual creativity across traditions for centuries. Although this inhibition may have been at times necessary in the past, today an increasing number of individuals may be prepared for a more creative engagement of their spiritual lives.

6. Grounded spiritual visions: As we have seen, most major spiritual traditions posit the existence of an isomorphism among the human being, 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—or of phenomena associated with it—the more complete his or her knowledge will be. This “completion” should not be understood quantitatively but rather in a qualitative sense. In other words, the more human dimensions 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 ongoing unfolding of the Mystery will be our knowledge (Ferrer, 2002, 2008).

In this regard, it is likely that many past and present spiritual visions are to some extent the product of dissociated ways of knowing—ways that emerge predominantly from accessing certain forms of transcendent consciousness but in disconnection from more immanent spiritual sources. 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 illusory or defective. This account is consistent with the Kashmir Saiva view that the illusory nature of the world belongs to an intermediate level of spiritual perception (*suddhavidya-tattva*), after which the world begins to be discerned as a real extension of the Lord Siva (Mishra, 1993). Indeed, 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 spiritually significant realities that are recognized as crucial for human and cosmic spiritual fruition (Ferrer, 2002; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008b).

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, as some traditions tell us, we could have been incarnated in more subtle planes or levels 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. To be sure, at certain crossroads on the spiritual path it may be necessary to go beyond our embodied existence in order to access essential dimensions of our identity (especially when external or internal conditions make it difficult or impossible to connect with those dimensions in our everyday life). However, to turn this move into a permanent spiritual *modus operandi* can easily create dissociations in one’s spiritual life leading to a devitalized body, an arrested emotional or interpersonal development, or lack of discrimination around sexual behavior—as the repeated sexual scandals of contemporary Western and Eastern spiritual teachers illustrate (see, e.g., Storr, 1996; Forsthöfel & Humes, 2005; Feuerstein, 2006).

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. But 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, co-create 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.

One does not need to hold a spiritual world view to recognize the miracle of Gaia (i.e., Earth as a living organism). 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. Unless one is open to the reality of alternate physical

universes, Gaia is the only place in the known cosmos where consciousness and matter coexist and can achieve a gradual integration through participating human beings. The inability to perceive Gaia as paradise is simply a consequence of our collective condition of arrested incarnation.

8. *Resacralization 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. In other words, having recognized the physical world as real, and being in contact with immanent spiritual life, a complete human being discerns nature as an organic embodiment of the Mystery. To sense our physical surroundings as the Spirit’s body offers natural resources for an ecologically grounded spiritual life.

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 (e.g., through social service, spiritually grounded political criticism, or environmental activism) 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.” A fascinating possibility to consider is that a fuller integration of immanent and transcendent spiritual energies in embodied existence may gradually open the doors to extraordinary longevity or other forms of metanormal functioning attested to by the world’s mystical traditions (see, e.g., Murphy, 1993).

A Final Word

I conclude this essay with some reflections about the past, present, and potential future of embodied spirituality. First, as even a cursory study of the lives of spiritual figures and mystics across traditions suggests, the spiritual history of humanity can be read, in part, as a story of the joys and sorrows of human dissociation. From ascetically enacted mystical ecstasies to world-denying monistic realizations, and from heart-expanding sexual sublimation to the moral struggles (and failures) of ancient and modern spiritual teachers, human spirituality has been characterized by an overriding impulse toward a liberation of consciousness that has too often taken place at the cost of the underdevelopment, subordination, or control of essential human attributes such as the body or sexuality. This account does not seek to excoriate past spiritualities, which may have been at times—though by no means always—perfectly legitimate and perhaps even necessary in their particular times and contexts, but merely to highlight the historical rarity of a fully embodied or integrative spirituality.

Second, in this essay I have explored how a more embodied spiritual life can emerge today from our participatory engagement with both the energy of consciousness and the sensuous energies of the body. 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.

Finally, embodied spirituality can access many spiritually significant revelations of self and world, some of which have been described by the world contemplative traditions, and others whose novel quality may require

a more creative engagement to be brought forth. In this context, the emerging embodied spirituality in the West can be seen as a modern exploration of an “incarnational spiritual praxis” in the sense that it seeks the creative transformation of the embodied person and the world, the spiritualization of matter and the sensuous grounding of Spirit, and, ultimately, the bringing together of heaven and earth. Who knows, perhaps as human beings gradually embody both transcendent and immanent spiritual energies—a twofold incarnation, so to speak—they can then 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.

Notes

1. An abridged version of this essay was originally published in 2006 with the title “Embodied Spirituality, Now and Then” in *Tikkun: Culture, Spirituality, Politics* (May/June), 41-45, 53-64.
2. The chakras (or cakras), whose number varies across the traditions, are the living body’s subtle energetic centers that store and channel the vital force (prana-sakti) of the individual. The Indian tantric tradition identifies six of these centers, located respectively at the base of the spine (muladhara), the pelvic sexual area (svadhisthana), the solar plexus (manipura), the heart (anahata), the throat (visuddha), and in the center of the eyebrows or “third eye” (ajna) (Basu, 1986). Whereas all these centers were considered in many religious practices, the overriding tendency has been to transmute the primary expressions of the vital force—connected to the lower chakras—into the subtle qualities and ecstasies of the heart and consciousness—connected to the higher chakras. If we accept the Indian account of the primordial vital force (sakti) as feminine and of consciousness (shiva) as masculine, traditional tantric practice can be seen as a kind of “internalized patriarchy” in which feminine energies are used at the service of masculine goals and expressions.

References

- Aurobindo, S. (2001). *The life divine* (6th ed.). Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- Barks, C. (2002). *The soul of Rumi: A new collection of ecstatic poems*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Barnhart, B. (2008). One spirit, one body: Jesus’ participatory revolution. In J. N. Ferrer & J. H. Sherman (Eds.), *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies* (pp. 265-91). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Basu, M. (1986). *Fundamentals of the philosophy of the tantras*. Calcutta, India: Mira Basu Publishers.
- Bhagat, M. G. (1976). *Ancient Indian asceticism*. New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Biale, D. (1992). *Eros and the Jews: From biblical Israel to contemporary America*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Brown, P. (1988). *The body and society: Men, women, and sexual renunciation in early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bynum, C. W. (1995). *The resurrection of the body in Western Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chittick, W. (1994). Microcosm, macrocosm, and perfect man. In *Imaginal worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the problem of religious diversity* (pp. 31-38). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Clarke, J. J. (2000). *The Tao of the West: Western transformations of Taoist thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, S. (1998). *Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, S. J. (1994). *The holy letter: A study of Jewish sexual morality*. Fort Lee, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Eliade, M. (1982). *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (ed. R. Winks). New York: Garland Publishers.
- Faivre, A. (1994). *Access to Western esotericism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Faure, B. (1983). *Chan insights and oversights: An epistemological critique of the Chan tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Faure, B. (1998). *The red thread: Buddhist approaches to sexuality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ferrer, J. N. (2002). *Revisioning transpersonal theory: A participatory vision of human spirituality*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Ferrer, J. N. (2003). Integral transformative practices: A participatory perspective. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 35(1), 21-42.

- Ferrer, J. N. (2007). Spirituality and intimate relationships: Monogamy, polyamory, and beyond. *Tikkun: Culture, Spirituality, Politics* (Jan/Feb), 37-43, 60-62.
- Ferrer, J. N. (2008). Spiritual knowing as participatory enaction: An answer to the question of religious pluralism. In J. N. Ferrer & J. H. Sherman (Eds.), *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies* (pp. 135-69). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Ferrer, J. N., Albareda, R. V., & Romero, M. T. (2004). Embodied participation in the mystery: Implications for the individual, interpersonal relationships, and society. *ReVision: The Journal of Consciousness and Transformation* 27(1), 10-17.
- Ferrer, J. N., Romero, M. T., & Albareda, R. V. (2005). Integral transformative education: A participatory proposal. *The Journal of Transformative Education* 3(4), 306-30.
- Ferrer, J. N., & Sherman, J. H. (Eds.). (2008a). *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Ferrer, J. N., & Sherman, J. H. (2008b). The participatory turn in spirituality, mysticism, and religious studies. In J. N. Ferrer & J. H. Sherman (Eds.), *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies* (1-78). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Feuerstein, G. (1998). *The Yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy, and practice*. Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press.
- Feuerstein, G. (2006). *Holy madness: Spirituality, crazy-wise teachers and enlightenment* (Rev. ed.). Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press.
- Fine, L. (1992). Purifying the body in the name of the soul: The problem of the body in sixteenth-century Kabbalah. In H. Eilberg-Schwartz (Ed.), *People of the body: Jews and Judaism from an embodied perspective* (pp. 117-42). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Flood, G. (2000). The purification of the body. In D. G. White (Ed.), *Tantra in practice* (pp. 507-20). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Forest, J. (1993). A Christian perspective on spirituality in light of the lives of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. *ReVision* 15(3), 115-20.
- Forsthoefel, T. A., & Humes, C. A. (Eds.). (2005). *Gurus in America*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Fort, A. O. (1998). *Jivanmukti in transformation: Embodied liberation in Advaita and neo-Advaita*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Galian, L. (2003). The centrality of the divine feminine in Sufism [On-line]. Available: http://kemetnu.gaia.com/blog/2008/4/sufiyya_sophia_and_the_divine_feminine?printable=1.
- Goenka, S. N. (1998). *Sattipaṭṭhāna Sutta discourses*. Seattle, WA: Vipassana Research Publications.
- Heron, J. (1998). *Sacred science: Person-centered inquiry into the spiritual and the subtle*. Roos-on-Wye, United Kingdom: PCCS Books.
- Heschel, S. (1996). Bringing heaven down to earth. *Tikkun* 11(2), 48-56.
- Jónsson, G. A. (1988). *The image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a century of Old Testament research* (L. Svendsen, Trans.). Lund, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiskell.
- Kasulis, T. (1990). Kukai (774-835): Philosophizing in the archaic. In F. E. Reynolds and D. Tracy (Eds.), *Myth and philosophy* (pp. 131-50). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Kazantzakis, N. (1965). *Report to Greco* (trans. P. A. Bien). Oxford: Bruno Cassirer.
- Lancaster, B. L. (2008). Engaging with the mind of God: The participatory path of Jewish mysticism. In J. N. Ferrer & J. H. Sherman (Eds.), *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies* (pp. 173-95). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Larson, G. J. (1969). *Classical Samkhya*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Lawlor, R. (1991). *Voices of the first day: Awakening in the aboriginal dreamtime*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- McDaniel, J. (1992). The embodiment of God among the Bāuls of Bengal. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, 27-39.
- Mishra, K. (1993). *Kashmir Saivism: The central philosophy of tantrism*. Portland, OR: Rudra Press.
- Murphy, M. (1993). *The future of the body: Explorations into the further evolution of human nature*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee.
- Nelson, L. E. (1998). The dualism of nondualism: Advaita Vedanta and the irrelevance of nature. In L. E. Nelson (Ed.), *Purifying the earthly body of God: Religion and ecology in Hindu India* (pp. 61-88). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Osterhold, H. M., Husserl, E. R., & Nicol, D. (2007). Rekindling the fire of transformative education: A participatory case study. *The Journal of Transformative Education* 5(3), 221-45.
- Overzee, H. (1992). *The body divine: The symbol of the body in the works of Teilhard de Chardin and Rāmānuja*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Parrinder, G. (1980). *Sexual morality in the world's religions*. Oxford, England: Oneworld.

Pourafzal, H., & Montgomery, R. (1998). *The spiritual wisdom of Haféz: Teachings of the philosopher of love*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.

Saso, M. (1997). The Taoist body and cosmic prayer. In S. Coakley (Ed.), *Religion and the body* (pp. 231-47). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Satprem (1992). *The mind of the cells or willed mutation of our species* (F. Mahak & L. Venet, Trans.). Pondicherry, India: Institute for Evolutionary Research.

Schipper, K. (1994). *The Taoist body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Skoog, K. (1996). Is the Jivanmukti state possible? Ramanuja's perspective. In A. O. Fort & P. Y. Mumme (Eds.), *Living liberation in Hindu thought* (pp. 63-90). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Storr, A. (1996). *Feet of clay. Saints, sinners, and madmen: A study of gurus*. New York: Free Press.

Shokek, S. (2001). *Kabbalah and the art of being*. London: Routledge.

Sovatsky, S. (1994). *Passions of innocence: Tantric celibacy and the mysteries of eros*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.

Teilhard de Chardin, P. (1968). *Science and Christ*. New York: Harper & Row.

Wayman, A. (1982). The human body as microcosm in India, Greek cosmology, and sixteenth-century Europe. *History of Religions* 22, 172-90.

Weiser-Hanks, M. E. (2000). *Christianity and sexuality in the early modern world: Regulating desire, reforming practice*. Florence, KY: Routledge.

Westheimer, R. K., & Mark, J. (1995). *Heavenly sex: Sexuality in the Jewish tradition*. New York: New York University Press.

Wimbush, V. L., & Valantasis, R. (Eds.). (1995). *Asceticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Williams, A. (1997). Zoroastrianism and the body. In S. Coakley (Ed.), *Religion and the body* (pp. 155-66). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, P. (1997). Some Mahayana perspectives on the body. In S. Coakley (Ed.), *Religion and the body* (pp. 205-30). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Winter, M. (1995). Islamic attitudes toward the human body. In J. M. Law (Ed.), *Religious reflections on the human body* (pp. 36-45). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Yasuo, Y. (1987). *The body: Toward an Eastern mind-body theory*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Yasuo, Y. (1993). *The body, self-cultivation, and ki-energy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

About the Author

Jorge N. Ferrer, PhD, is chair of the Department of East-West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, where he teaches courses on transpersonal studies, comparative mysticism, embodied spiritual inquiry, and spiritual perspectives on sexuality and relationships. He is the author of *Revisioning transpersonal theory: A participatory vision of human spirituality* (SUNY Press, 2002) and co-editor of *The participatory turn: Spirituality, mysticism, religious studies* (SUNY Press, 2008).