

The Body of Love

By Doug McGill

*(The second of six talks given at the Rochester Meditation Center as
"The One Reality is Love: Six Evenings Exploring a Miracle")*

In this series of evenings we're experimenting with knowing love in a more specific and tangible way than we ever have. We're experimenting with ways we can hold our attention with our bodies in such a way that we can know love in this very experiential way which restores us, makes more accessible to us this way of living infused with gratitude, freshness and insight. We want to know love as an experience of non-separateness, directly, in the body.

We can do this by knowing our bodies in a certain way. By knowing our bodies in this way we know in our experience, with a certainty like knowing the unique taste, color and weight of a thing, that we are not lonely isolated beings floating in the void but that we are actually deeply connected to each other, so deeply connected that there's really no separateness at all.

This is what we are shooting for: to experience non-separateness knowingly in the body. So there is no mistaking whatsoever. So it's more real even than what we normally take to be real.

Once we find a way to do this all conflict must come to an end. Because then everything in experience— all sensations, thoughts, feelings and perceptions—is experienced as the self and there will therefore be no reason to get in any conflict with anyone or anything. If we experience the whole world as the self, harming so-called "other" beings makes no sense because they are all a part of our own self. Any harm is recognized as self-harm so the intention to harm must very naturally and indeed rationally come to an end.

What's being suggested tonight, and here I'm channelling the Buddha and sages from time immemorial, is that basically there is only one reason why conflict of any kind arises at any level —personally, between two people, in groups, communities, cities, states or nations.

That root reason is that human beings don't understand their true nature. They think of themselves as separate. In believing they are separate they then behave in accordance with this belief. Whereas, traditions such as those taught by the Buddha and others point to a way to work with our experience in such a way that we really tangibly feel, not just intellectually know, but know in a tangible and embodied way the reality of non-separateness. Of oneness.

There's a very beautiful poem from Buddhism, it said to come from one of the earliest, if not the earliest Buddhist scriptures, the so-called Pali Canon. It is written in the first person voice of the Buddha and directly illuminates the root cause of conflict in human beings, within themselves and among others. I love the poem because it sounds like a real human being talking, a fairly young man struggling to understand things. Then it describes how understanding came to him.

It's called the Attadanda ("Arming Oneself") Sutta:

*Fear is born from arming oneself.
Just see how many people fight!*

*I'll tell you about the dreadful fear
That caused me to shake all over:*

*Seeing creatures flopping around,
Like fish in water too shallow.
So hostile to one another!
Seeing this, I became afraid.*

*This world completely lacks essence;
It trembles in all directions.
I longed to find myself a place
Unscathed— But I could not see it.*

*Seeing people locked in conflict,
I became completely distraught.
But then I discerned here a thorn—
Hard to see—lodged deep in the heart.*

*It's only when pierced by this thorn
That one runs in all directions.
So that if that thorn is taken out—
One does not run, and settles down.*

I will interject here: So, what is that thorn? The Buddha answers:

*For whom there is no "this is mine"
Nor anything like "that is theirs"
Not even finding "selfness"
He does not grieve at "I have nothing."*

*For whom there is no "I-making"
All throughout the body and mind,
And who therefore grieves not
For what is not Is undefeated in the world.*

So there it is. To the Buddha the thorn in the heart which is the source of conflict among human beings, at all levels, is "I-making." It's the thought of "I," that we are separate beings, which thought we then believe and grasp to. It's the thought that we have that we are separate from other beings in any meaningful way. Separate not only from other human beings but also from animals, plants and physical objects. That we are outside of the whole realm of nature.

It's critical to know the feeling of that thorn, not just intellectually but what it feels like in the body. We need to know the feeling of the thorn and where it's located before we can extract it.

The feeling of that thorn is the feeling of separation. Right now, try to summon within yourself what it's like to feel lonely. How does it feel in the body to be lonely? Where is the feeling felt—in the heart, the chest, the belly, the limbs? All of those places and more?

Use other words if they work for you to bring up the feeling of the thorn: Unknown. Misunderstood. Unsupported. Abandoned. Betrayed.

Things happen especially in our early lives to create the thorn and those painful feelings. It's the main reason we create an "I" in the first place: to arm ourselves against more pain. We create a "I" to protect ourselves, to deflect hurt and harm, and to fight back when needed.

Something happens in our lives that creates a sense of separation and we make an "I." A part of that is the personal story, things that happen. But something else happens as well which is that our society and our culture, our tradition, trains us to be and to feel separate. Our society transmits a whole system of thinking that drills into our consciousness that we are separate beings one from another, a system of thinking that only reinforces any painful experience of loneliness or emotional abandonment we may have suffered in our lives.

The six weeks on "love" we are spending together are dedicated to thorn removal.

In particular, to learning specific practices that allow us to go right to that root of separation at both the level of thinking and feeling, to pull out the thorn or let it dissolve and flush out.

We need to extract the thorn along two paths, thinking and feeling. Because we both think we are separate, and we feel we are separate. We need to examine the belief that we are separate intellectually, with thought and logic, a process we might call "using a thorn to remove a thorn." However, feelings of separation, loneliness, betrayal and like emotions are bone-deep hurts lodged throughout the body and aren't so easily extracted. For this we need profound practices of mindfulness that invite and open to these hurts and hold them, dissolving them in love.

We need to proceed on both of these level, thinking and feeling, to really allow us to substantially relax those deep contractions of suffering in the body, and start to experience a relaxed body and mind as our natural state. This is how we'll be able to move into this way of living, being well-established in relating to all experience in a non-separate way.

It takes work because we are so deeply conditioned otherwise. Also, it's a challenge because there is a part of us that isn't happy with our efforts to be free from suffering. We resist our own efforts to be happy, we sabotage ourselves in innumerable ways. There is something about suffering that loves to continue suffering, have you noticed? In our daily lives we so often choose the familiar-but-uncomfortable paths of discomfort and suffering rather than trying something new and different that might actually offer relief. Somehow, a fresh new path often seems more threatening to us than losing our painful-but-at-least-familiar habits.

In meditation this same attachment to suffering shows up in the innumerable ways we resist getting quiet within ourselves. We are rested, and yet we mysteriously get sleepy when we start to meditate. Or we get restless. Or our minds makes up reasons why the meditation we are doing is just somehow not right for us now (e.g., "It's not the ideal time," "My body isn't ready right now," "It's a guided meditation and I don't like guided meditations"), and so on.

A tried-and-true meditation instruction is simply to watch whatever resistance arises to the present moment, opening to it and exploring it fully. We learn a lot when we do that. Most of our practice tonight is about removing the thorn at the feeling level, but let's first consider the thinking level. Where does the believe in separateness come from originally?

The Western world for more than 2000 years has taken the separateness of human consciousness as a foundational belief, by believing that matter is the fundamental reality.

This is what we learn. The creation story of modern Western culture is that the universe began in a pea-sized dot that contained all matter, which then exploded creating galaxies and stars and solar systems. On the planets in these solar systems, at least on Earth, this primordial matter continued to evolve into more and more complex forms.

Finally, atoms got together to form life and somewhere, somehow, atoms arranged themselves in such a way that consciousness was created. In this story, human beings are placed at the apex of evolution where consciousness is believed to have taken its highest and most complex form.

Yet this whole story sets up separation because by this way of thinking consciousness is locked up in the matter of bodies somehow. Each body contains a consciousness which is separated from all other consciousnesses by the matter which entraps it. Communication between these consciousnesses is enacted like a complex semaphore conducted between two fortress towers, primarily via speech. A true merger of consciousnesses by this model would be as impossible as the inhabitants of those two fort towers, separated by miles, ever communicating with each other by more than a symbol system of flags, flashing lights, trumpet blasts or puffs of smoke.

Like right now, by this model, my consciousness is different from Allison's consciousness, because mine exists in my brain and hers is in her brain. And good luck ever getting across even six feet of space to reach the other consciousnesses. It's very lonely-making. Then of course there is the related idea that comes along with this way of thinking, the idea that when the body dies, the consciousness inside dies with it. Because consciousness is in the body.

This belief that our essence is trapped inside the matter of our brains and bodies is carried along and transmitted in the formulations of language, in our customs, education, traits and tendencies. This root thought of separateness at the heart of modern Western culture then also goes deep into the body in the ways I mentioned earlier. So it's really a very deep thing.

As we go through these weeks tonight and the following weeks, we'll go between the levels of the mind and the body, to question the belief of separateness and its feeling in the body.

So let's do a meditation that seeks to answer the question, "Is our prevailing inherited belief about the separateness of our consciousness what is actually noticed in experience?" For example, at the level of mind, we believe that our experiences of life are themselves separate from one another—that they are fundamentally distinct. What are our experiences of life? Well, basically all of our experiences are one of four types—sensations, emotions, perceptions and thoughts. And then mind says that these are separate and distinct.

But is this what we notice in our experience? Would it be possible that if we looked closely, we would find that these experiences seem to be distinct but are actually all made of the same thing? In the same way that waves on the ocean all look different but are all equally the ocean? Maybe matter itself isn't the most fundamental thing. Maybe consciousness or awareness is the most fundamental thing. Maybe our bodies appear in awareness instead of awareness appearing in our bodies. Could this be noticed and explored in our own experience?

So just to go this much starts to open up the territory and we can start to see the possibility of working with experience in this questioning way. We can use awareness like a microscope to examine our experience directly, without the intervening interoperation of thoughts.

Let's do a meditation to explore our bodies in this direct and experiential way. We'll explore especially whether we find separateness in experience, or whether we find non-separateness in our bodies. And we'll try to discover what are our bodies actually made of, if we take a good look with experience itself. Are we made of matter or consciousness? What we are looking for is our true nature, so that we know it from our direct experience. That would be as distinct from what our minds say about our true nature, which is the way we usually go. When we meditate we decide to be here directly with our experience putting thought aside to see what we find.

<30 minute meditation>

Let's explore that experience. Ask any questions, share any experiences, especially seeing if we can stay on the track of, how can we use our experience to cultivate in this specific way, the continuing felt sense of non-separateness. Of love.

Please do mention ways you discover the mind might be saying, "No. This can't be." The mind might be saying, "No way are we really emptiness." If that's happening please report that.

Q: I didn't want to end that luminous emptiness. I didn't want to leave it. I wanted to stay with it.

A: Why didn't you?

Q: I saw "clinging, clinging, I'm trying to stay with loveliness." Then I said, okay, I can go back to that, all I need to do is say, emptiness, luminous, spacious and from that I can experience it.

A: Can you also see that the sights that you let in, as you open your eyes, and as you do that that the appearance of distance also takes place—there's nothing like sight to give us the sense we are separate beings. Compare how you feel in the calmness of collected inner space, and when we open our eyes it's easy to feel like BOOM! we are suddenly back in a flash to being separate from everything and everybody again. We are all in separate rooms again of space, and in the rooms of our bodies. But could we notice in a different way, can we see through the illusion by noticing that sights themselves are happening right now, in our awareness, right alongside sounds and thoughts and emotions? Could you incorporate that into the continuing direct knowing of sensations, sounds and perceptions as being all in the same place?

Q: I can because when I look out people look connected and combined, it's very lovely. Again I didn't want to leave it.

A: You can just notice the clinging and that's hanging in the space like everything else is. The clinging itself is just another thing, right?

Q: I'm so interested in how these teachings can help me be a more skillful person. Skillful in my conduct in all ways, and skillful in my regard. I'm interested in the practicality of it. I was having an experience recently, working with someone as a teacher to this person. Finding myself challenged by her personality and thinking thoughts like "She's relying on me to be a good teacher to her" and finding myself in thoughts like "What a little pill, is she on the autism

spectrum, what a strange little person!" I'm having thoughts like this, which is not skillful or graceful, not helpful, fair. So I came pretty quickly, seconds here, to love and unity and non-separateness. First of all what's the pill in me, what's this also in me? Which is pretty obvious. And how might I like to be appealed to? And the answer was, instead of carrying on in the judgmental way or chasing after her in a persuasive way, to get more and more gentle and more and more diffuse, and less and less separate at every moment until something transformed. It eventually did. It felt like a practical use of this love practice. Which I appreciate.

A: Nice. Really nice. It's good when good things happen to be really clear about what happened so they can be replicated. Can you tell what exactly did you do that made that all possible?

Q: I recognized myself in a defilement, a perception of separateness. I recognized myself in separateness and I recognized myself in judgment. Knowing instantly that if I'm in a judgment it's only internal. So luckily that comes pretty quickly. This is only internal. So then using empathy or relating to these behaviors instantly recognizing the ways that I could behave this way and the reasons why, and what's helpful for me. How I find my way out of it or how people help me out of it. All of this happening as quickly as I can manage. Then essentially taking a hands off approach. "Hands off," and then "hands off everything."

A: Translating into the language we've been using, it sounds as if what you did was first, you saw what you characterized as unskillful—judgmental, separation-making, mind-activity. Putting the pill over there, and you the righteous one here. And then you saw both as your self. Actually what you saw there was what you might call your Separate Self, the self that sees things in terms of separation. From the space of awareness you saw two beings, the pill, and then yourself-as-the-Separate-Self. But both were arising in the same space of awareness, which is your true nature, and therefore were both part of you as this larger self of true nature. Seeing in this way is the same as doing the "hands off." So then you did the hands off and you opened around everything and you saw that everything was happening in the same space of awareness which is your own true nature. The pill, the person on the autism spectrum was looking at you weird, doing whatever she was doing. Also, there was you, the you that was feeling defensive against that person or annoyed by that person. That was happening also in that space. This separate self was creating the stream of thoughts and self-judgments—"unskillful," "same-old-Laurel," "there I go again," "bad person." That was all happening. Also in the same place of awareness you were noticing other things. A whole universe of other things surely were happening that you noticed. Feelings in the body were happening, your posture was being noticed, and you were noticing all these things were happening and you were just seeing them as happening but not reacting to them. That means that you were making the switch right then from identifying with Laurel-as-the-Separate Self to Laurel-as-your-true-nature-as-awareness. You were noticing that you have the capacity to hold everything within your true nature as pure awareness. In so doing you gave yourself a whole huge array of new possibilities for action and you were just going to wait until a good possibility popped up and you noticed it and you could act on it. It was a way of keeping things all together, by noticing that they already were all together in this way of seeing things, the way awareness which is your true nature. The noticing, allowing, patient and wise qualities of awareness is the real and actual you. You could have reacted to the woman in one of a hundred different ways, from your true nature as awareness, the hands off position, you gave yourself the time and freedom to wait until you saw a way that you could respond to her in a way that she could say, "Laurel is helping me here." From the non-dual perspective, again in a practical way, it's not just that she is noticing that Laurel is helping her, but Laurel-as-true-nature is helping herself as well, because the whole experience

is one thing. You and the pill are actually one thing. You look different but are part of the same whole entity, like two hands look separate but they are actually both part of the same body. Working in this way, you work with everyone you meet in the same way you work with your self, which from the perspective of you-as-awareness is just another person that you meet. You've got the outer pill of the client, and the inner pill of your Separate Self, both actually inner and outer are just ideas, from the point-of-view of awareness these are just two things happening in the same space of consciousness. You see? They are both in the same space of awareness in the same way that your body and my body are in the same space of this room. The inner pill and the outer pill and your are working with them both, all within the true bigness of you.

Q: Then this remarkable juxtaposition, she's the teacher.

A: Absolutely. She's giving you opportunity after opportunity to be who you really are and discover all kinds of new things. One thing that's really nice about this practice and the way it's languaged is there never needs to be any doubt about where to go at any moment. One can go to awareness. Awareness is just a word, other words for it are love and true nature and patience. There is something about calling it awareness though that gives us a sense that it's a specific place to land our attention and it turns out to be a very healthy place to go. Where exactly is awareness? Awareness is that which knows. So no matter what is being known, in this case let's say the pill, one can immediately say, "What is knowing the pill? What is knowing my self-judgement. What is knowing my body posture?" And then you turn your attention to that and rest there. That's the practice of knowing awareness as love, awareness as the natural activity of love. It's the activity of inclusion and allowing everything, which is already happening. All that has to happen is to remember that, to see that and to rest there. It's something to be played with and investigated and see if it works out that way for you. Isn't it true, one might say, that when one abides in awareness, and explores the qualities of awareness, one finds displayed all of the qualities that one would ever hope to find in something we would call love. Like endless acceptance and allowing. For example, awareness was totally allowing everything that was happening between you and your client. It was also completely allowing of your self-judgements and your inner dialog. It held everything peacefully. It was there when you needed it, it was reliable. And within that there arose some wisdom, wisdom that allowed the totality to be recognized as a whole. To keep the relationship you might say. But here's something interesting. You kept the relationship but at the same time there's no more relationship you might say, because you and she became known as a part of one, you might say. Anyway, you can always think of awareness as love, and if you want to go to love, go to awareness and see if things don't work out as if love itself had just moved in made things possible. Made peace possible. Anyone here having a little argument with any of this, an internal argument?

A: I think it's tricky. A: I second.

Q: I third. Always in the past, one of the things I look forward to is the silence. Because in our day-to-day lives is we don't have that. So one of the things I enjoy is having the first half an hour or whatever, no talking. So I'm having a hard time with you talking in the meditative part. Part of it is, in that silence is the opportunity to observe what is arising. When you are talking, not that you don't have anything great to say, you do. But it's a distraction, it's like, "Okay, I've got to think about this." So what comes up for me is impatience and anger.

A: Great. I'm glad I asked.

Q: What am I doing here? And then there is this thing about, knowing and sensing, it becomes almost an intellectual exercise that steps away from what's happening. I feel really frustrated because one of the things I really enjoy in the past is the half hour or 15 minutes of total no talking. It's a way to calm down, get in. Do you know what I'm saying?

A: I do. And I'm so glad you said what you said.

Q: I was listening carefully to Laurel's story about working with the client who was a pill. There was something there I thought was important. It was something important but subtle when you said you observed the pillness being within you, within your creation. Not creating as this person creating something and this person over here but within the larger-Laurel. It was all within you, this mini-conflict, and at this point it wasn't so much of a problem it was just kind of a happening. Am I in the right place?

A: Yup.

Q: Then I turn to BJ and say the pillness of the client was like the pillness of Doug ... (laughter in the room)

A: Very happy to oblige. You're welcome.

Q: So as far as the practicality goes, there seems to be a promise of this perspective being available for all circumstances. It would be nice to know where the switch is. To turn it on. Is it productive to think about developing this perspective, practicing this perspective, waiting for this perspective to come to me, learning about the perspective, understanding the perspective. How shall I proceed? It's been helpful tonight. Hearing Laurel was quite interesting and instructive. When I say tricky, it's easy to shift back and forth. Not easy like simple. I find myself in the other place a lot of the time.

A: Thinking, is that it?

Q: I guess so. The world of, I guess you are calling it separateness.

Q: I can totally relate to what Laurel talked about. I have encounters like that a lot and had a very difficult one today myself. A very difficult encounter. Oh my goodness, when I hear you I think, "Oh she did that well!" At the same time I think Okay, I did well too. Because it's acknowledging everything going on inside, and I think from the discussion last week I thought, okay, bring compassion to that. I don't have to judge those feelings that I feel as being bad or negative or that I shouldn't have them. But that I should just bring, just noticing it, the awareness, peace, and letting all this stuff go on at the same time. I guess not being able to control the outcome for sure, either. Because you can't always control an outcome, how it's going to turn out. My reaction when you said this was another opportunity, how did you say that? I thought, wow, life, endless opportunities to grow, to expand.

A: Every difficulty, every hurt, every frustration, every impatience that we feel is actually an invitation to look inward, to accept with compassion, to grow. And in this way to learn who we are, learn who we really are, that we have the capacity to deal with anything. Did you want to say anything Jerry?

Q: A few things. First, I think we are in consensus that you are our thorn. (laughter) A: I would ask for a show of hands on that but I'm scared to. (laughter)

Q: When I said, "I second that," I was seconding the last thing Rick mentioned. I understand what BJ was saying about silent and guided meditations, because guided meditations are hard. But there was something in your guided meditation that was very powerful to me. It was to the effect that, is our awareness in our body and mind, or are our body and mind in our awareness? Which started me thinking, when we think about our awareness, where is it located? We don't know. Is it in our body or not, or is our body in our awareness. Trying to focus on that, meditate one, "Is our body in awareness as opposed to the other way around." There were moments, maybe nanoseconds, when I could experience that. But this is pretty real (touching one hand to another), this body that we feel and sense and, if I cut I bleed. So the last thing that I think Rick was saying, going back and forth between these ways of knowing, it's very hard because you are saying concentrate on your awareness and see what your experience says, but our lifetime of experience says the other thing.

A: Yes, that's why I said, tell me about frustration because I know it's here. It has to be here because this mode we are exploring put us right up against the conditioning of a lifetime if not more. Certainly, of more. And it can be extremely challenging, and the meditations we are doing take work. It's out of the box, it's really out of the box and it feels weird at first. And an immense amount of resistance can arise and that's okay. It's like when a plane lands and the reverse thrusters go on, and the forward momentum goes against the brakes, and the plane can feel like it's rattling so hard it's breaking apart. I worked with this for a year and a half before I brought it out to the group. The results of sticking with it are worth it and more, I'd say. Also there are important lines of continuity to notice between this practice and the practice we've been doing for years here. For example, when we went through the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, he always stresses the importance of investigating our direct experience. Tussling with experience, even a kind of grabbing and asking "What is this, I must know what this is, I'm going to stick with this until I know this..." And keep looking. Hanging in there with continuous awareness, patiently waiting out all distractions until insight dawns. This kind of meditation is in that tradition. It's moving right in there, plunging into experience and asking questions. Asking questions is often about using thought to challenge thought and ultimately to dislodge thought. It's using a thorn to dig in and pull out another thorn. It's not the way we normally doing things in meditation. Like BJ was saying, often we want the only calm of samadhi and just allow things to come up and watch. But this taking Tejaniya's instructions, to actively get in there and investigate, to a whole new level. It's very unusual to hear so many words in a guided meditation. It's unusual, it's different. But the words are always being used and hopefully being understood, merely as pointers to true nature which is not conceptual. They are words which are meant to point to something beyond words. When the guided instruction is to know something, such as a body sensation, the idea isn't to understand the idea of knowing as a thought, but rather to turn to experience and experience it, in the same way we would experience the sourness of a lemon or the soft smooth texture of a silk scarf. Can we as we listen to the words be constantly letting them go and staying on our direct experience? That's the work to do. In this respect, I might add, these meditations are excellent training for daily life. Because if we can get through guided meditations, listening to all the words while also letting them go, we can become really skilled at letting the words go as we hear them. That's excellent training for daily life when we go out there and all these things are happening, of which speech is only one thing, which we are tending to always grasping to, but which we need to let go. Guided meditation is good to get comfortable with because we learn skills that allow us to reenter the world in a smoother, easier way.

Q: It strikes me as a territory where we've come too far to go back and be the same, and we are not yet far enough to know what the hell we are doing.

A: Perfect. This really sums up the spiritual search, we always feel like, where are we going anyway? Where are we going? And yet, we can know. We get a sense of something of supreme value and we can keep ourselves going to that. That's not valued enough, or spoken enough about in society that we can feel certain where we are going, that we are moving ourselves to what we deeply know is a place of authentic, supreme value, which for this series of talks is the place of knowing who we really are in our true nature. The sages talked about this all the time but for us it remains a bit distant, still a bit strange. "What we are looking for is what is looking." Or "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience." I bring these out because don't we all actually know, already, what those statements are saying? If we are honest with ourselves, and take the time to notice, we really do know. It's a certainty. We know we are spiritual beings having a human experience. We get it right there. It's just that we don't normally stay with it. Those words, "We are spiritual beings having a human experience," those words point to a way we would like to be most or all of the time. And how can we get established there? In the early days, like learning how to swim or ride a bike, it feels really weird. The first day of class, the first week or two of class, oh my God. But that's what learning feels like.

Q: I have a little resistance, I question, like making awareness central. I want to question, what is that. What awareness is. This leads to conclusions, I worry you are rushing me to conclusions.

A: Yes. That's why we can call it an hypothesis. "Our true nature as love is awareness." Keep it as an hypothesis. Experiment to see if the hypothesis works out for you as true, that consciousness is fundamental, that awareness is love, that awareness the qualities of love.

Q: I don't know what awareness is. We can sit with that for a long time. It's a really good question, what is this thing? But I'm not there yet to say one or the other.

A: Beautiful. Stay with the questioning ...