

## **The Spirituality of Embodiment**

by Irene Glasse

My name is Irene. I facilitate the monthly Labyrinth walks here, and teach the free yoga class on Fridays.

In 2010, I had reached a place of spiritual darkness. For me, my connection to my spirituality had never been something I questioned—it was always present. It was a sensation of light inside my chest, and this nebulous idea that the light inside me was connected to everything else around me. Somehow, through an overburdened life and too many worries, that light inside me faded. And I didn't know to get it back. My usual routes of connection – ritual, prayer, meditation – weren't working. I felt lost.

As I wrestled with that particular problem, a friend invited me to go to a gentle yoga class with her. I had tried yoga through a gym once before and didn't like it, but I didn't have plans that morning and thought 'Sure, why not.'

I am so glad I went.

That class was the first thing I had done in months that felt GOOD. The breathing practice – what yogis call Pranayama – helped clear my mind. The gentle movements of the practice freed me of the constant whirl of thoughts inside my head and allowed me to simply concentrate on lifting my arm or moving my feet. No extraneous mental noise. When we lay down for the final rest of the practice, a pose called savasana, I felt like I was floating in a pool of light. The same light that I experienced when my connection to my spirituality was healthy.

I was hooked, of course. The way back to the connection I had taken for granted wasn't gone. It was just something I had to reach through a different door. I began taking yoga classes.

That fall I went to a Pagan spiritual retreat in Massachusetts. At that retreat, called Twilight Covening, attendees work in smaller groups on one particular focus. My group was working with the Labyrinth. I discovered through that retreat a very similar phenomenon. Through walking with intention through the labyrinth, I shed layers of darkness and disconnection, and felt the light kindling inside of me. Sometimes growing so bright that the physical world paled in comparison to the radiance I felt inside myself.

I was learning something important: that my body wasn't the vehicle I'd always assumed it was. It was more important than that. More than a mere tool.

When I came home I continued to take yoga classes, gradually moving from a gentle yoga class to a level one yoga class – a slightly more vigorous practice. The strangest things started to happen to me. For about 6 months, whenever I lay down at the end of practice, into savasana, I would start to cry. I didn't even know why. I wasn't sad, or upset in any way. But every time, the tears would come while I floated in that perfect, glowing space of rest.

I know why now, of course. Five years later, I'm a yoga teacher. I want to be able to give people the same transformation I experienced myself.

The poses we do aren't just movements or postures. Your body isn't just flesh. When we stand in a warrior stance in a class, we are definitely strengthening our legs. We're also strengthening our confidence. When we stretch the shoulders and chest to open the pectoral muscles and relax the upper back, we are also opening ourselves. That class of poses aren't called 'heart openers' for nothing.

When I was crying during savasana, lying there on my mat, it's because all of those physical movements I was doing were breaking up stiff places in my body. Not just stiffness of muscles and joints, but places where old emotions and hurtful memories had been stored. I was releasing poison that I'd been carrying. Darkness that had taken up residence in my very cells.

In many theological and philosophical traditions, we relegate the body to a role as a chariot—something the spirit or psyche rides. What I have learned through my own path is rather different. My body is the tip of the iceberg jutting into the air of the world. But as with that iceberg, there is a whole world of self beneath the surface. And what happens to the part of the iceberg above the water deeply impacts the unseen self. What you do with your body, what you experience with it, how you move it and care for it and feed it, has an effect on your mind and on your spirituality. Because it is not separate. Your body and mind and spirit are one being.

Five years on, I spend the warm months outside. I went from being someone who hates sweating to someone who loves it. I went from watching television to not even owning one. Instead, I spend my time out walking under the trees, breathing the warm, rich scent of growing green things, and feeling the way that tickles my spirit. I travel the rivers in my kayak and fill my mind with the glitter of sun on the water and the quiet lap of the current against my boat. And I feel that light in me grow brighter.

And I do yoga. LOTS of yoga.

And now I know exactly where my light is. It's in the center of my chest, and it radiates out to connect to all living things. It's in my chest. Not my spiritual chest, or my psychic chest or my imagined chest. It's here. In my body. And to nurture it, to care for it, I spend time IN my body. I allow my body to be the beautiful, integrated space that contains and transmutes and amplifies my spirit. Because truly, those divisions are illusion. We are whole. And what we experience on one level echoes within every part of us.

I'd like to invite you to rise in body or spirit as you are able. Bring one hand to your chest and one to your belly. Begin to concentrate on your breathing. Feel the swell of your breath as it rises against your hands. This is the breath that remembers to breathe you, even when you do not remember to breathe it. Feel that breath growing deeper. Lengthening and expanding.

On your next exhale, release your hands down by your sides. On your inhale, allow your hands to rise with your breath, riding up the center channel and then exhaling, releasing, letting your hands ride the breath back down. Inhale to rise. Exhale to lower. Inhale to expand. Exhale to ground. If you would like, close your eyes and allow this movement, this breath, to be all you think about. Inhaling up. Exhaling down.

Gently return yourself to stillness. Feel your breath as it moves within your body. And when you are ready, settle back into your seat as one whole being.

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