

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

I recently received a copy of Susan's newest book, *Heart Open Body Awake: Four Steps to Embodied Spirituality*, from Shambhala Publications, Inc.

The book's title intrigued me. As I have noted in other reviews, books simply appear at just the right moment in my life. *Heart Open Body Awake* is another one of those times. Susan is not just sharing her life's work, she is also present on the pages of the text; she reveals her inner processing, her inquisitiveness as she explores her own protective defenses and faces the intensity of integrating new levels of openness.

"Always, I am feeling my body. I am noticing mental beliefs, attitudes, positions that are stopping life from flowing through my body. I am seeking to release those and see what happens. I am asking myself if I can trust what is happening inside me and around me. By trusting, I can allow myself to be nakedly present within it and then see what happens next" (pg. 200).

“All problems are psychological, and all solutions are spiritual.”

I met Susan Aposhyan during my graduate program at Santa Barbara Graduate School, Santa Barbara, CA. As a professor in somatic psychology, she designed her curriculum to be both brain/mind and body based—we read and talked as much as we moved into and through the content to experience it.

She had a calm quiet presence; her voice gentle to listen to, the materials easily absorbed. I remember she had us physically enact what she called the five fundamental actions: yield, push, reach, grasp and pull. I can still see myself reaching my hands outward as if trying to grasp something and pull it inward to my chest, then I pushed some invisible object away. To end, I yielded—I relaxed on the classroom floor sensed into my body and noticed the sensations arising. Her concept of bodily movements meaning more, being deeper than patterned physical actions/reactions fascinated me.

I had much to learn from Susan, then. And, as it turns out, I’m still learning from her now.





Sitting today with more awareness I see the power behind what felt like a simple exercise when I was a student, and I see the immense possibilities in the knowledge and exercises she is offering today. Pushing, pulling, reaching, grasping, yielding without collapse. They may seem like innocuous movements yet when I look at them in context everything changes.

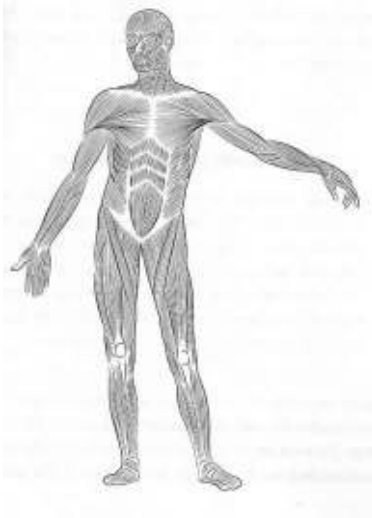
For instance: What if I had been physically abused, attacked, traumatized, and I couldn't defend myself, I couldn't push someone (or something) off of me. What if this happened time and time again. Over time, I would no longer be able to push someone or something away. I remember trying to start a self-defense class back in the 1980s. One of the first lessons was to stand with your feet hip width apart, dominant foot forward so you felt grounded and steady. We were supposed to raise our hands up, palms forward, thrust them out as if pushing someone away and yell, "NO." My arms were limp, my push non-existent, my no a whimper. The teacher suggested I wasn't ready for a self- defense class.

Or, what if you constantly had your hand slapped for reaching out to touch things, to explore your world one finger at a time. That initiative, that drive would be stifled, stuck as you learned to keep your hands to yourself. That reach to explore, to be curious, to connect was beaten out of you so you no longer reach out.

Each of these movements, when viewed within life stories, has the potential to result in defeating patterns. Our entire being (body, feeling, soul) becomes stuck, unable to complete a fundamental action that is part of our innate need to survive and thrive.

A Look Inside

The book is divided into four parts: Heart of Humanity; Body of Life; Deepening and Blossoming; and The Path of Opening. Its contents are derived from decades of personal and professional experience. Susan has spent her “whole adult life” exploring spirituality and how it fit with embodiment, the human body and human development. She came to realize that spirituality connects us to the larger world and dissolves the boundaries between self and other: “It takes us through our bodies into egoless union with the larger deepest world.”



Susan offers definitions, explanations/lessons, and short case examples; black and white anatomical drawings support the text. She also shares extensive mini practices throughout the book to allow readers to feel what is emerging in the moment, to support their natural and unique growth and development as they pause to feel and practice and reflect. Readers have the opportunity to see if they can feel the presence of emotion in their body, notice where and what sensations might be there and what wisdom might arise within or from that emotion.

My usual hiccup when reviewing books that offer experientials is that authors (or perhaps it is money-conscious publishers) expect readers to read these exploratory meditations and practices and do them at the same time. It is just not possible. In my experience, little to nothing good comes of it. I had one publisher tell me to record myself reading the exercise and then play it back. Like, how many people like the sound of their own voice on their answering machine?

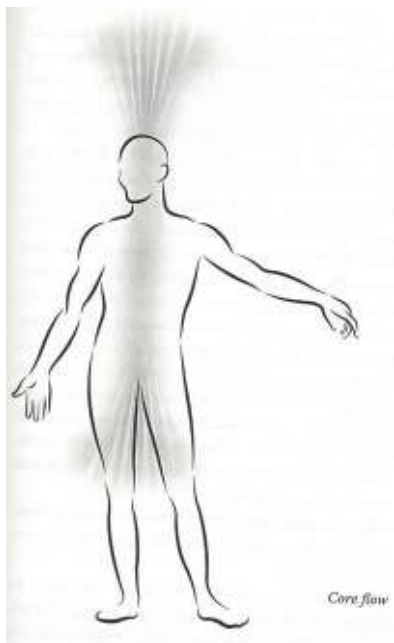
Susan’s ability to guide readers through similar experiences via recorded examples on her website is proof enough for me that a CD or mp3 or online website is warranted. Her skill of verbally guiding listeners into these practices is polished, grounded in years of experience. And her voice is pleasant to listen to, soft, nuanced, well-paced, encouraging, soothing. There needs to be a place for readers to easily access the experientials in the moment, to set the book down and be with Susan in these moments and then emerge and take time to reflect, to journal, to explore within themselves what arose.

I also think some readers might appreciate joining an online reading group, a place to share their experiences and process what is happening as they unravel past patterns, as they come into a sense of what it feels like to live life from their heart, rather than from their brain. To be open and witness to their becoming, moving from a domesticated human who is functioning according to societal expectations to a fully embodied, spiritually energetic resonance that transcends the egoic boundaries of framed and limited selves to expand into the limitless universal connections with all that is.

“Spiritual qualities emerge on a physical level as we become ever more familiar with our own bodily systems and their inner and outer relationships” (pg. 36).

According to Susan, Chinese medicine has long supported the belief that the heart is the center of our being and it governs the rest of our body. How? According to Susan, by listening to the blood, its rhythms, its constituents, by listening to all of the subtle information coming from every cell in the body. The heart guides by resting fully in its place in the center of the chest. “When we are living in our body, it is the center of here and the center of now.”

Susan delves into the body and teaches readers about the heart, about the wisdom of emotions, the breath, and what she calls portals of our body (face/head, hands, feet, and pelvic floor), which are pathways to open and bring the inside out and the outside in. “When we wake up the portals, we tell our sensations which way is out, where the door is” (pg. 70).



The spine and our core flow are also explored as they are important in most approaches in embodied spirituality. Opening to a greater energy flow through our core results in overall changes so Susan focuses on opening the heart, lengthening the spine, and strengthening core postural muscles to support spontaneous energetic flow through our body.

“Emotional awareness of the heart requires quiet meditation time to develop what feels right in your heart” (pg. 35).

Susan presents four foundations of mindfulness:

- ⇒ Mindfulness of body
- ⇒ Mindfulness of feeling
- ⇒ Mindfulness of mind
- ⇒ Mindfulness of phenomena

Each moment that we are mindful offers the opportunity to feel into our experience, to notice and be with sensations that are physiologically occurring in the body in the present moment. Sensations have an emotional tone, a quality of feeling associated with either wellbeing or distress, living or dying. Sigmund Freud said that much of human behavior is acting out unconscious emotional patterns (pg. 26).

From Susan's perspective, everything we do, all movements, states, and behaviors are founded in sensation. To live fully again she writes, we must practice allowing what we have silenced and held still to move, we must go beyond mindfulness of sensation and allow physiology to restart itself where it has been slowed down.

“Embodied practice finds safe ways to reintegrate parts of ourselves that we have shut down, to listen and allow whatever we feel to move and breathe in its own way” (53).

What is emotional tone in sensations? For that matter, what exactly are emotions? One online source notes: “Emotions are psychological states comprised of thoughts, feelings, physiological changes, expressive behaviors and inclinations to act.”

Many people might agree that they were taught to downplay their emotions, to tune them out, repress them. People often try to rationalize their way out of them. Per Susan, emotions often come with strong sensations, even overwhelming movements. She offers that, “The art of working with emotions is being able to express what needs to be expressed and allow emotions to move out of our bodies” (19).



Deepening and Blossoming.

Here Susan offers experientials for readers to lean into their bodies, to listen to their sensations, to develop a deeper relationship with their body. She offers questions to ask sensations and ways to listen to what Eugene Gendlin called a “felt shift”, which is when we have the opportunity to acknowledge and allow layers of our sensations and experiences that we have not noticed before to come into contact, to offer a response to our questions if even a sense of yes or no.

She offers instructions for a formal embodiment practice, adding that we have the rest of our lives to let this practice develop—it’s not a sprint to the finish line but rather a lifelong quest to explore moment by moment.



Chapter 10 discusses the five foundational actions that I mentioned at the beginning of this review. She writes that by becoming familiar with these actions and in tune with them, we can make “the expression of our sensations in Embodiment Practice all the more articulate and meaningful” (pg. 97).

A short insight into each Fundamental Action

“Yielding is relaxing into gravity but also into the fullness of our own beings, so it is multidimensional. Yielding is not collapsing. . . in terms of embodied

spirituality, yield is what allow us to not only relax into the moment but also relax into feeling our bodies, clearing out any old, tense patterns that obscure presence and finally, resting into a unitive state” (98)

“Push is the action that allows us to differentiate ourselves from the world. We need a balance here: we need enough push to find a starting point, to be clear about finding our unique path, and to have the strength to show up and stay the course moment to moment but too much can become its own obstacle” (98)

“Reach: more than a position, it is a state of mind, an openness a curiosity. On any spiritual path, we need to feel this kind of openness and expansion in our bodies to go beyond what we already know” (99)

“Grasp and Pull: sometimes we need to take hold of what we experience and bring it into our beings and our lives. What do we need to grasp on to that experience and pull it into ourselves?” (100)

“The purpose of relationship is the spiritual growth of people.”

The last part of the book deals with relationships, making friends with death, and realizing your own path of Embodied Spirituality. The overriding question in terms of relationships is: What is the purpose of the relationship for me in the first place? Followed by: Can I continue to feel my own body and give my sensations permission to express themselves while I am in relationship with others?

Susan recommends Embodiment Practice as an approach to embodied spirituality. She discusses six principles of embodied spirituality and how the four foundations of mindfulness meet the four steps of embodied spirituality.

A Quick End

There is so much within this book that I have not even mentioned. The depth and expanse are amazing. This is not a once around read but rather a guide to use to create and continue your journey into bodily and spiritual awareness and in turn embodied spirituality.

Susan ends with these words:

May you continue to find your way.

May your embodied spirituality mature and ripen to its fullest capacity.

May all beings find their own way and develop to their fullest capacity.

Readers who are interested in buying this book can receive a 30% discount with code HOBA30 from Shambhala.com through September 2021



Susan Aposhyan has been teaching and practicing meditation for 45 years. She is the author of *Heart Open Body Awake: The Four Steps of Embodied Spirituality*, *Natural Intelligence: Body-Mind Integration and Human Development* and *Body-Mind Psychotherapy*. Susan trains professionals in her Body-Mind Psychotherapy, integrating science with healing and meditative experience.
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Note: I do not receive any compensation for my reviews. I write what I feel and share my experiences with colleagues' books in hopes of sharing what I consider quality literature that I think

will positively impact our personal lives, our clinical work, and our field.

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