

Life As It Is
Episode #5 with Martin Aylward
“Coming Back to Embodiment”
December 8, 2021



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. We often hear meditation described in terms of mindfulness. But Buddhist teacher and writer Martin Aylward playfully offers bodyfulness as an alternative. In his latest book, *Awake Where You Are: The Art of Embodied Awareness*, Aylward invites readers into their own embodied experience, offering what he calls “a guidebook for an embodied life.”

In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Aylward to discuss the power of embodied attention, how the pandemic has changed our relationship with our bodies, and how we can work with physical pain and discomfort in our practice.

James Shaheen: I’m here with Buddhist teacher and writer Martin Aylward and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Sharon. Hi, Martin.

Martin Aylward: Hey.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

James Shaheen: It’s great to be with you both. So we’re here to talk about your new book, Martin, *Awake Where You Are: The Art of Embodied Awareness*. Why don’t you start by telling us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Martin Aylward: Sure, I guess the initial inspiration was this line of Buddha’s that the whole universe arises and passes right here in this body and the way that’s borne out by meditative experience, the meeting with life, sensory life, psychological life, emotional life, the life that’s

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within and around us, and increasingly feeling meditation as intimately involved with relaxation in a way. I'm familiar as maybe you are with hearing meditation teachers sometimes say, "Meditation is about a lot more than relaxation," and then I started to think, really? In the early years of my practice, I had been more mind-y with mindfulness and mind training and thinking of meditation as some kind of mental discipline or mental training. The fact is that all the complexities of mind that we get into are reflected in tension patterns and energetic holding and posturing that we do physically, and actually so much of what we do meet emotionally and psychologically and so much of our complexities can actually be really well met and engaged with and resolved through noticing the tension patterns and relaxing, relaxing. Of course, that's a relaxation that isn't just muscular. It goes beyond that to energetic relaxation and what we could call an emotional relaxation or even an existential relaxation. That sense of really embodied awareness, an embodied ground to meditation, felt to me like I could find a whole way through a path of practice and looking at psychological and emotional stuff and relational issues and how we are in the world but keeping this thread of really sensing and finding our way through the material of our lives in a very embodied way.

James Shaheen: Right, you've already mentioned embodied a few times, and you describe the book as "a guidebook for an embodied life." You invite readers down into their own embodied presence. So that really seems to be an emphasis in the book.

Martin Aylward: Yeah, and I try to keep inviting people back to that throughout the chapters. In the spirit of that, I guess I would invite the same thing of anybody listening right now. So we might find ourselves engaged in the content of what's being said, but it's interesting as you listen, how are you listening? Are there some unnecessary and unhelpful tension patterns that are alive right now? Is your forehead slightly tense, or is your jaw a little tight, or are your shoulders or your belly being held in a certain way? If you notice that, just invite that to soften. It's a very simple and yet very immediate way in which we notice there can be a little more ease, a little

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more space, a little more openness, a little more receptivity. And so as we go on talking together, that would be the invitation for people to keep checking in in that way, keep sensing. In other words, to keep supporting a very embodied kind of presence.

Sharon Salzberg: Speaking of embodiment, I’m trying to feel the relationship between relaxation and an offering you make as an alternative to the language we usually hear about mindfulness, which is watching something or observing something, and going back to the original text of the *Satipatthana Sutta*, you’re saying “to enter into.” So now I’m very intrigued: what is the relationship between entering into—first of all, what does it mean, and what’s the relationship between that and relaxation?

Martin Aylward: Yeah, so that entering into, you know the refrain in the Satipatthana where the Buddha keeps on using the phrase of “from the inside,” knowing the breathing from inside the breathing, knowing the sensations from inside the sensations. And so I found that using that kind of language of inhabiting experience, being intimate with experience, entering into experience, rather than the language of observing or watching, it just helps that process. I don’t want to make a big deal out of relaxation in a way that suggests one should be relaxed in some way. But actually, you don’t need to relax. The entering into might show you where there’s some tension, and if you really recognize and sense into tension, you find out that it wants to relax actually. We don’t want to be tense. And yet, often we’re used to a degree of tension that we don’t even recognize as tension. We just recognize it as me and how I am. I hold myself in a certain way. You can track that by virtue of the fact that if you tense intentionally right now, anybody listening, you feel more solid, you feel more dense, you feel more me. There’s a more solid sense of self. The boundaries between me and the world seem more solid and real. And then by contrast, if you just let that soften a little bit, just very immediately, the sense of boundary softens. Our sense of self is very much related to tension, and you can track a tighter or looser, a narrower or more receptive sense of self and sense of the locus of experience just through that,

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through tension and relaxation and the infinitely deepening trajectory of that as it becomes more subtle, as you become more interested in it, as you become more in love with just hanging out and being at home in your body.

Sharon Salzberg: You're reminding me actually of something that I've taught, which is that so much of the language implies something other than what I think is actually the truth, which is that we're already leaning forward, trying to control or hold on or cling or something like that, and so if we say something like settle back, it's to a place of natural balance and peace. It's not hurling something away in dislike or trying to avoid it, but it's undoing the thing that we tend to do. We tend to do it because we don't realize how much it hurts. If we can just feel that, as you say, and settle back into a greater state of balance, that's also a place where so much of what we want, like love, as you say, and insight, wisdom will arise anyway. So I also want to say that you're so inventive and creative in your use of language. The term *sati*, which is usually translated from the Pali as mindfulness, you're proposing that we think of *sati* as bodyfulness. What does body fullness look like in action?

Martin Aylward: Well, to back up a little bit, I like to translate *sati* as presence, but Buddha's very clear about what kind of attention constitutes presence, and it's *yoniso manasikaro*, which usually gets translated as embodied attention. But if you want to go to the etymology, it means, I call it a womby attention. *Yoni* is often translated as vagina, especially in the yogic practices, but it seems to be actually a more generic term for all the female reproductive stuff. In this context, womby attention, I find that really beautiful, one, because the sense of the womb as the deepest place in us, the sense of the womb being the source of life, and the womb in terms of pregnancy with possibility, the fact that when you really relax into your belly, your belly feels big. It feels round. Some of the population here, including myself, might be thinking, “Well, hold on, I haven't got a womb.” But it's interesting, we have no trouble thinking of the heart in two different ways. We think of the heart as the organ, the blood pump, and then we talk about the

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heart as the center of emotional life. Love doesn't actually live in your chest. But we recognize that when we talk about love and we refer to the heart, somehow, energetically and experientially, this is the center of where we experience love. In the same way, we talk about the head in different ways. There's the head as this lump on top of the shoulders, and then there's the head center, and we think of cognitive life as being centered there. The belly, or the womb, in this sense is like that. It's the center of embodied intelligence. It's the center of presence. And that term, *yoniso manasikaro*, seems to me the Buddha's way of pointing out the primacy of a relaxed attention, being at home down in your belly. Likewise, all those old Chinese fat monks that you see, interestingly enough, who may be happy looking, big smiling, big-bellied buddhas, to me those big bellies are like a representation of a filled-out womb presence.

Sharon Salzberg: You actually use the phrase “embellied attention,” which is kind of amazing. Wow.

Martin Aylward: Yeah, and of course, a lot of us culturally, we feel either the inner or the outer pressure to suck in our bellies in some way. In meditation, it doesn't work—it's painful to hold your belly in. And yet often we notice that that's conditioned, that's just the way we are, and to let your belly soften and relax. I know myself, when that started to happen, I'd have to open my eyes sometimes and look down and check because I felt like I had this great distended stomach, but it actually was just an energetic felt sense of expansion. I love the word prosperity. We usually think of it in financial terms, but to me, it has that feeling of a satisfaction in the belly, an ease in the belly. My dad, after a good meal, would sometimes lean back in his chair, and he'd pat his stomach, and he'd say, “Ah, all bought and paid for.” Somehow, that sense of a kind of gladness, it's very beautiful to have a happy belly, and a happy belly is a round one energetically. It's got that quality of fullness or even prosperity to it.

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Sharon Salzberg: It’s so much fun listening to you. Even using presence instead of mindfulness is an interesting choice, and you first learned embodied presence by example from your teachers, including a Himalayan hermit known as Babaji, which, of course, brings India back to me and that life and that time in my life. Can you tell us what you learned from spending time with Babaji?

Martin Aylward: Sometimes I hesitate a little bit because I’m often teaching in a context where people are not going off to Asia or to hang out in the Himalayas or in some obscure monastery. I think the danger when sometimes we’re talking about these exotic Eastern adventures like you also lived, it can make it sound like that’s where the enlightenment is—it’s over there in those monasteries and hermitages. But it was incredibly formative for me. I was just 19 years old and wandering around, falling in love with meditation, but in a very, very unintegrated way, I hadn’t at all learned how to be a human yet, let alone an adult human. I didn’t really want to be a human. I wanted to be some kind of spiritual something else. After sitting my first 10-day meditation course, in this rather grandiose adolescent way, I decided, “Right, I’m off to the cave. That’s what yogis do.” I walked out of Dharamsala where the course had been and walked up. I was 19 years old, I was terrified because I didn’t have any blankets, I didn’t have anything to eat, but I somehow thought, well, that’s the whole point. You’ve got to go to the cave without all that stuff. So I headed off out of the town and up into the forest and the hills, and to my good fortune, I met this old Baba, this sadhu, who I had not met in Rajasthan previously, about 1000 miles away. He said, “Oh, where are you going?” And I said, “I’m off to the cave to meditate.” He rolled his eyes at me and said, “Look, why don’t you go across that valley and the river up that path? You’ll find this one Baba living there. He has a little place. Maybe you can stay with him.” And so of course, that was greatly relieving to me. I went there, and in classic tradition, he said, “You can sleep there for three nights,” and I stayed for most of the next three years. It was very informal. He never really tried to teach me anything. But I learned a lot. He always said, “Oh,

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you've done this meditation course. You've got a practice. Just do that." And in between I was coming and going to Thailand and monasteries there with Ajahn Buddhadasa and elsewhere.

Talking about presence rather than mindfulness, mindfulness can sound like a technique in some way. But in some ways I feel like I learned about presence by osmosis from him by the way he made tea and the way he moved a piece of firewood around from one place to another, the way he undid the lid of a jar, the way we washed pots together. It was like everything was worthy of attention. Everything was worthy of care. And in my scattered, adolescent mind with all my overly complicated ideas about meditation. It was incredibly relieving and heartening and educational, I guess, to have that sense of bringing my practice into the way I unscrewed the tea lid. On the one hand, I felt very, very clumsy and awkward next to Babaji, but I also felt like he was relentlessly kind and forgiving and generous-spirited to me, and that was very invitational to me to just become attentive in a quiet way.

There's an anecdote I tell in the book about painting the windows. I got all enthusiastic about painting the windows. After the first day, he said to me, "Look, stop, your problem is you're trying to paint the windows. Just stop. Just take care of the brushstrokes, and let God paint the windows. It's not your responsibility. You just take care." And I started to notice the smell and the way the light caught the paint and just to really give myself to that process. Sure enough, incredibly to me at the end of four or five days of sanding and painting, to stand back and see all these red shutters on the windows of the ashram, it did feel like that to me. It was like, "Oh, I took care of the brushstrokes. And God has painted the windows." Infinite ways to apply that basic principle of karma yoga that you don't worry about the fruits of your actions. Just take care of the quality of care and attention with which you engage in your actions. He was incredibly kind and helpful to me in that way.

Sharon Salzberg: What a beautiful approach to that particular teaching because it could come from lots of different angles, including a pretty spare or terse "Pay attention, whatever you're doing." But this was so lovely as a message, almost like a blessing. Just do this.

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Martin Aylward: Yeah. And even though the language is one of attention, and I'm sure that you found this with your own teachers as well, the quality of being with somebody in that practice and being accompanied by that practice, it's not attention in a dry sense. You could equally describe the whole process as love. You could say, "I'm giving attention to my breath," or "I'm giving attention to painting the windows." But it's equally, "I'm learning how to love this in breath, learning how to love this brushstroke." The sparseness drops away.

Sharon Salzberg: I'm going to try to say embellished attention, but I don't know if I can very easily. That's going to take a little while. Because you're right, it is love. And it's so much connection with what's going on. Now, I'm also curious before I give the floor to James about if we can feel the power of somebody who's more full on embellished attention and just the integration of their being. I'm thinking about how does such a being experience us, and is that the birth of compassion, because even as incomplete as any of us may be, we may be with people who are in tremendous psychic pain, for example. One of the most poignant things is where you see somebody's beauty so clearly, and they do not see it, and you get this tremendous sense of division and disconnection within them. I'm just wondering about the relationship between those two things. When any one of us exhibits a more full-on embellished attention, doesn't that help the other person mirror it in some way?

Martin Aylward: My sense is it can go either way actually. It can serve if you're with somebody who's basically at home in themselves, at ease in their skin, *bien dans ses baskets*, we say in French, or they're good in their sneakers. If somebody is really at ease, that can be really invitational to somebody else. It's like in their companion's ease, they can find reflected to them their own tension and the invitation to drop it. And I also think it can go the other way where people can be intimidated. It can be very uncomfortable to be around someone who's free and

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open and relaxed and loving because it somehow reflects back to me all the ways I'm not. I don't know that that's what it's doing necessarily, but it's like the light of the other is too dazzling.

I remember going to visit some old sadhu in Nepal once who my teacher sent me to. He's a 95-year-old guy with dreadlocks down to the floor and three meters off behind him. I turned up at his gate, and he said to me, “You sit down there and sit on your position.” That was the way he put it, and I sat down there feeling intimidated. I just had the sense that whatever was going on in my mind, this guy could see it all. He just knew everything that was happening. And I started off like, “Oh my God.” The more I was alarmed by the fact that he knew my mind, the worst kind of stuff seems to come up in my mind, and so that sense of being intimidated and freaked out by the fact that we're being seen basically. And then an hour or two passed, and he's just humming around and making tea in the background, just going on with his life, but I nevertheless felt like I was stark naked there, psychically naked. And then it's like, “Oh, hey, if he really can see or feel or somehow know what's going on with me and I'm still here and he's still making tea in the background, maybe it's OK. Maybe I don't need to take myself so personally, so seriously.” So for me in that moment, it switched from being intimidated by somebody else's invitation to actually letting it work on me in some way.

Sharon Salzberg: That's wonderful.

James Shaheen: You know, Martin, you've talked a little bit about the ease of embodiment. But in the book, you also write about the difficult parts of embodiment including physical pain and discomfort that can come with meditation—sore legs, stiff back, achy knees, the whole bit. How can we work with the physical discomfort in our meditation practice, because with embodiment, there's a reason we sometimes want to run the other way.

Martin Aylward: The amazing thing about meditation is it's a kind of controlled environment. It's a controlled pain environment. In so many situations in life, you can't turn off the pain. And

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yet with meditation, you can always move your legs. You can always stretch your shoulders out. You can stand up. You can just stop and go and have a cup of tea. Just holding it in that way is really helpful because we can get rather—I certainly used to get very tight around the pain of meditation, thinking I should be able to sit through it or I should be able to sit in a certain posture for a certain time. It seems to me that, of course, it is really helpful to sit with and to lean into discomfort. You get to study your reactivity and your neuroses and all that kind of catastrophe fantasy that we do, and yet it seems to me it's helpful as long as you can cultivate spaciousness and relaxation and not taking your reactivity so seriously and actually able to sense into the discomfort and leave it alone a little bit and maybe even love it. You can love it even if you don't like it. Then it's helpful. At some point, you can't do that anymore. At some point, it's just too much. I'm tired, I'm tight, I'm fed up, and then it's just as much a part of your practice in that moment to actually intentionally give yourself a break.

James Shaheen: One of the things I discovered early on is that having a certain amount of curiosity about the discomfort was tremendously helpful. I remember very clearly early on at IMS sitting in retreat with Sharon and Joseph. I had this pain in my back, and when I became interested in it, it became an anchor of attention. And when it left, I was disappointed. So the irony of that, but curiosity is tremendously helpful there, I found.

Martin Aylward: Intensity holds our attention. If something is intensely pleasurable or intensely unpleasant, it draws the attention. It helps in that way to hold your attention, and then when it goes, the attention goes bouncing around again, and then you find you might miss it in that sense. But again, it's because it's a controlled environment. People live with chronic pain or ongoing intense pain or pain that you can't switch off. In some ways, I think the fact that meditation is a controlled environment, it's an amazing opportunity to train your capacity to be curious about discomfort, to be tolerant of discomfort, to be tender towards discomfort for those times when suddenly you don't have any option and you can't turn it off, that sense of really using

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meditation to practice while you can control the environment because what a blessing that is when you can't control the environment, when you have pain that won't go away.

James Shaheen: You know, there's something I wanted to add here that I hadn't planned on asking, but it's about coming back when we're momentarily lost. For decades, Sharon has taught that it's in the coming back that we strengthen that attention muscle. And yet at the same time, sometimes the effort, as Sharon has spoken about often, is sort of tense. We drag ourselves back to embodiment, yet we're already there. I wonder if you both could comment on that because it is easy to become discouraged because you can become, in certain settings, lost again and again and again. It really helped me to take Sharon's advice to heart that it's in the coming back that we progress, if you can call it that. And yet with embodiment, in fact, we're embodied all the time. There's another way to come back, and that's to simply remember. I wonder if you could both say something about that.

Martin Aylward: It's interesting, like you say, that effortful way of coming back, because that's how it feels at first. It's like my default mode is just lost in thought, caught up in my endless details and dramas, and then I remember, and it seems like I have to drag my attention back to this thing called the present moment and try and hold it here, and as soon as there's a moment of inattention, boom, I'm gone again. But embodied presence starts to show us that actually, all those departures are themselves effortful. If you're caught up in some thought stream, inevitably, that mental effort, that mental activity has correlates. Your brow is tight or your shoulders are up or your jaw is clenched or you're leaning in some way. And then you realize you don't have to drag your attention back. When you see that you've been gone somewhere and you notice the inherent tensions, just soften, just let them soften, let them soften. Then we find that actually being present is natural, easeful, restful, basically. That's a really important fulcrum change in practice. From feeling like being lost is the path of least resistance and that I have to put forth effort to be present, we realize that actually, it's the opposite. It's all those departures that take

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energy, and I just have to let that soften or dissolve, and then we start to realize, “Oh, I can actually be more or less constantly present.” Rather than there being glimpses of presence amidst a sea of mental activity, it’s actually the other way around: more or less constantly present, more or less constantly landed in a basic feeling of ease, but of course, the taste of freeness running through our experience, and then sometimes some little thing gets hold of my attention and starts to create some drama, and I start to ride off on that horse, and then it quickly becomes obvious, “Oh, no, what’s happening? Why would I do that?” And then letting the edifice just crumble again.

James Shaheen: It was that part of the book that made me ask that question and also Sharon’s teachings. Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: I think here’s where I appreciate a lot the offering of context, however we come to it, because we all tend to bring our own expectations and our self-criticism and all these habits of mind right into our practice, where they can live and flourish, and that’s sort of not the point at all. Here, I also look at language a lot, because I hear people ask and say things like, “I want to maintain mindfulness throughout the day without a break.” And I usually say, “I don’t think that’s going to happen.” It’s exactly like Martin described. It’s OK, actually, because you can begin again more and more quickly. You will see that. You don’t feel so comfortable in intense reactivity or imbalance, and there’s something in you that will want to come back, and that happens sooner and sooner. That’s a different quality of life when that happens. And so rather than despair and think, “Oh no, I got caught up again, and it was the same stupid thing that caught me up,” saying, “Look at that. This is really different.” I find we all need to be reminded again and again that this is the point and not that beatific, unbroken state that we somehow imagined was going to be ours after a lot of work. And so I want to move on actually and talk a little bit about our time because it is such an unusual time with the pandemic, and that has upended so many of our usual physical routines both on a practical level—we may wear

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masks—or on a psychological level, before we go a certain place, we weigh the risks of being in that space and pay attention to our bodies differently. I have asthma and have for many years, and I’ve had a chronic cough from asthma, and so now, of course, every cough I look at it differently, or certainly when other people hear me cough, and they’re like, “Oh no,” that’s an interesting thing, too. So, this whole sense of embodiment, our own embodiment, the physicality of it, I think, has really been challenged in so many ways, and I’m wondering about your thoughts about that.

Martin Aylward: Yeah, in so many ways. I noticed it last week. It was my wife’s birthday, and her birthday is on Halloween, so it’s a big thing in our house. For the first time in a few years, we had a big party, and everyone dressed up and came over, and it was great. In France, where I live, we have very well-established protocols of greeting each other, or we did until two years ago. You shake hands, you kiss on the cheeks. We don’t do that awkward thing that we used to do when I lived in the UK where you don’t know whether to hug, kiss, shake hands, do nothing, or hunch your shoulders, so you do some awkward mix of some or other of those. The French, we have these fluid social protocols, except they’ve all gone in the last couple of years. And now we don’t know how to greet each other anymore. In one way, there’s a loss to that. There’s a loss of the familiar, comfortable social forms where we have these beautiful ways of saying, “Oh, yeah, here I am, and I see you,” which is really what you’re doing right when you’re greeting somebody. You’re letting them know, “I’m here, and I’m OK, and I’m glad that you’re here.” And on the other hand, suddenly, there’s something fresh about it, because you can’t just go through the motions of a kiss on the cheek, and then we’re done. There’s this invitation to actually stop and look in the person’s eyes and actually see, “Oh, hey, how are you doing? Hey, I am here.” It was very touching, actually, just in that party, making a different quality of contact with someone in the moment just because the familiar protocols aren’t available.

We managed to maintain residential retreats pretty much all through the pandemic. At first, we shut down for three months in spring of 2020, but then we had people coming all of last

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summer, and everybody was masked, and we had a few times where people became symptomatic and tested positive in the middle of a retreat, but we never had any transmission within a retreat because we were basically taking care and people were masked at all times. That was very interesting as well to sit in a room full of meditators and only get to see people's eyes. A couple of weeks ago, we just had our first unmasked retreat. We had people test on arrival, get tested again on day two or three, and it was amazing just to sit in the room with all these glowing Buddha faces and be able to see all of them.

And yet we're very far from being out the other side. In fact, there was an article in the Atlantic today about how COVID is going to become endemic, and we've got no real plan for how to manage that. It really, really affects our way of being with each other physically and just the way we connect, and we don't really know how that's going to pan out. And then there are also the people that feel extra marginalized because of different health conditions. These are interesting times, and COVID is in some way a foretaste of the various other forms of collapse that are coming around the corner, whether we like it or not. When one really looks at the environmental data, just like we know that we're dying, and yet it's so hard to really let that in, the truth that I'm dying every day. Collectively, we have that same difficulty to really acknowledge how fragile our collective existence is in terms of resource use and air pollution and all the other things that I'm sure people are aware of here. The heartbreak in a way of COVID and seeing the dysfunction and the polarization and the politicization of things like mask wearing and vaccination is that what we really, really need to do, regardless of the crisis, is take care of each other. It's heartbreaking to see that we don't seem to be collectively very good. We just don't seem to be at the stage where we're very well able yet to just take care of each other.

Sharon Salzberg: I think in the beginning, I did have a stirring of hope that this would do the precise thing that you're talking about, that we would have a very different sense of all being together, and to some extent, perhaps that happened. Certainly it happened for different individuals. But it also evidenced so much cruelty and disparity and othering and so many things

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like that, not to mention that not everyone has the skills of being really alone. James knows he's one of maybe seven people that I've been with in two years in a room because I came up here to Barre, and I was doing a tremendous amount of teaching, which is another thing to talk about, the online, disembodied experience. People would come in with masks and record me, and this was before the vaccine, and I really felt like my own practice and the years of practice had given me a sense of connection that could be vital and alive without a whole lot of physical presence. So I have lost some social skills, no doubt, which I'm sure James would attest to. But I have felt very connected nonetheless.

James Shaheen: You know, Martin, you point out how difficult it is for people to simply take care of each other. But I have to say that when I get on the subway and I see every single person is wearing a mask or if someone isn't, they're an outlier, I'm kind of moved by that, because everyone has simply adapted to this rather uncomfortable truth. Nobody likes putting on a mask and wearing it all the time. And yet on the subway, whether people think they're supposed to or whether they should or not, everybody's wearing it. So there is, I think, a level of care in the community. And I ask this because you also write about the collective body and our need for community. So how do you think the pandemic has changed our relationship to community?

Martin Aylward: I think it depends so much on where you are, and probably it depends on what you read as well. But I appreciate that point you just made, James. I found it very touching, actually, in the early days of going out into town or shopping, that sense of mask wearing as exactly that, as a real act but also a symbolic act of mutual caretaking, that there were moments where it really felt like that's what we were doing. We were taking care of each other. It's good to nourish oneself with that when it's there because there's a lot more dystopian ways of when you see in the media what's happening around all the pushback and the disinformation, whether it's about masks or vaccines or all the movements that are encouraging us to polarize in some ways. I've lived all my adult life in community, whether monasteries or ashrams or then in the retreat

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centers that I founded here in France, and I had COVID right at the beginning of the pandemic, and it turned into long form, so I was pretty out of it for about a year and a half. Certainly the first few months, I was absolutely in bed, in bed, in bed. My two adult children had come home at the beginning of the pandemic, and my wife was here, and it was springtime. I was looking out the window a lot, and it was that season where everything's turning green. Of course, my wife and my children were community in that spring, but also the greening trees were really part of that community. In that first lockdown when there were no planes in the sky and the sounds of the world were different and wild animals were coming into town centers because there were no cars on the street, there was this window into a rediscovery of the magic and intimacy of connection, not just with each other but with the natural world and the resource of that. I'm reminded of that statement of the Buddha's where he lists the resources for deepening one's practice: listening to dharma, reflecting on dharma, meditating on dharma, teaching dharma, and just hanging out under trees. I'm not sure that's quite the way he phrased it, but basically contact with the natural world.

James Shaheen: It anticipated my next question, which was about maintaining connection, and you just express that so beautifully. Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I had the same thought that it's all about connection. And what a beautiful thought, connecting to the nature of things, to trees, even if our ordinary quantity of human connection is not happening. It's very beautiful.

James Shaheen: I'm going to come back to the book for a moment, and in it you write about three instinctual drives: the drive to survive, the sex drive, and the social drive. You say that rather than repress or transcend these drives, we might enter into them. Can you walk us through these three drives and what lies beneath them?

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Martin Aylward: After coming back from some years in Asia and then having children and all, it became clear to me that the monastic model that I had inherited as a practice ideal wasn't really going to work in a life in relationship and with children and all the rest. It struck me that the three key areas that monastics consciously step away from beautifully and importantly and potently that are the the key areas of an engaged life are working in a conventional sense, sexual engagement, and dealing with money. You can look at the Theravada tradition as a very beautiful and potent way of doing that. Why those three areas? Because it clears the decks in a way. It simplifies things to really practice deeply. And yet it also started to seem to me that actually going into, entering into those areas is also really potent, which is the heart of the tantric approach. You really get to see yourself and your sense of identity. It's incredible how we generate our sense of identity around our work or around how we are with money or around intimate relationships so that those things are really mirrors for us. I started to teach a course called “Work, Sex, Money, Dharma,” which really tried to bring those back into the field, because, hey, I love the monastic tradition, but the way I'm living and the way all my students are living, they're all working or trying to; they're dealing with money; they're either having sex or not, but they're involved in the world of relationship in some way, even if they've chosen consciously to be outside of that. I was learning a lot myself in those areas.

It seems to me we have these predominant drives, even though we're all beholden to all three. The survival instinct, or the survival drive, is the one where it's like the self trying to protect the self, basically, It's like an inner loop. How can I be OK? How can I be safe? What do I need? And then the sexual instinct is not necessarily all about sex, actually. It's more focused on the other, so for some people, an other becomes the predominant focus. Will you give me what I need? I get my sense predominantly of joy and of being resourced and of contact from an other. And then for other people, it's the social drive, which is more my relationship to the world at large. How am I seen by the world at large? What do I get from the world at large? In the book, I apply basic dharma principles and practice principles to looking at those three areas and the different versions by which they get expressed, because actually, I think everyone can

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recognize themselves in all three of those drives, of course. They're just very fundamental human drives. But by attending to the one that predominates for us, the one that we most easily get pulled into, it seems to me there's a lot we can learn about ourselves there, and that's what that chapter is opening up.

James Shaheen: Just to go to sex since we don't usually talk about it when we talk about meditation, I'd like to quote a passage from the book. You write, “At the heart of the sex drive is the longing for intimacy, uniting with and dissolving into something outside of ourselves. And that is the essence of meditative practice, to pour ourselves into life and let life pour into us. In this dimension, all of life is sex. All of life interpenetrates. Everything, using Thich Nhat Hanh's phrase, inter-is. Our intimacy is with sky and earth and all of existence.” I thought that was a novel way to look at that in relationship to meditation.

Martin Aylward: It's often seemed to me that there's something—erotic isn't quite the right word, because we've got very specific associations that we might have when I say erotic, but that quality of eros, of interpenetration. The language we use around to make love is one of intimacy, of losing oneself in another. That which we associate with being the best and the most beautiful and the deepest and the most nourishing in sexual love, a lot of those qualities are really present in meditation: the sense of intimacy with, dissolving into, being filled by. Again, I think the natural world is an amazing resource for that, that sense of the quality of eros, being loved by the world as much as one is loving the world, and I think it's helpful to reclaim some of the language around sex, which often is unhelpfully pushed out of the way. There's some understanding that of course sex is a powerful drive, and one can get into difficulty with it, one can get obsessive around it. There's a lot of possibility for beauty there, and there's a lot of possibility for harm and abuse there, etc. But it seems a shame to throw the baby out with the bathwater in a way and given that most of my students are living lay lives, what a shame to leave sex out of our teachings and our practice and the language and metaphor of all of that as well.

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James Shaheen: Or, for that matter, pleasure. At one point, you share a passage from a sutta where the Buddha speaks of a skilled contemplative as one who makes their own pleasure through the pleasure of embodied awareness. Can you say something about the role of pleasure in awakening?

Martin Aylward: Just to go right back to the beginning, that quality of relaxing, and what starts off to be an uncomfortable body, a restless body, an anxious body, a defended body, but as we learn to settle, we learn that it's OK to be here. It's OK to be in this body. As we go through the armature and the energetic knots and tensions and heat that all starts to come up when we really get into meditation, it seems to me the basic experience of being human is pleasant. One's body is basically happy to be here. Of course, there can be all kinds of difficulties, illness, and injury and all other kinds of things that get in the way of that. As I get older, and certainly through the year of having COVID, I've plenty of pretty strong and ongoing unpleasantness going on in bodily life. And yet still, it's sort of like one's soul is happy to be alive. We were made to be alive, at least for a decade or few. Underneath our neuroses and all our pushing and pulling, most deeply, we're glad to be here. Connecting to that—in fact, just the retreat I gave last week, the first day or two of the instructions, I talked about pleasure more than I might usually, just connecting to the pleasure of relaxation, the pleasure of the fact that you're able to breathe. People really remarked on it, during the retreat, how much of a resource it was. Whatever else is going on, you can actually, as you settle down to meditation before your legs start to hurt and everything else, just to find some way you can connect with a sense that it's good to be here, some sense you're glad to be here, some way in which your belly is glad to relax or your your breath is pleasurable to come in and out. It's a really helpful resource, especially as people end up making meditation into this kind of chore or this thing they're supposed to do that's good for them rather than this moment, I get to sit down in myself.

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James Shaheen: Yeah, the Thai Forest monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about finding pleasure in the breath as a skillful means to continue because without that, we might not continue.

Sharon Salzberg: Alright, I have just one more question. You write about love as an embodied practice. Can you speak about the four boundless qualities and how we can experience them in our body?

Martin Aylward: So I talk about the *brahma-viharas*, or the boundless qualities of the heart, as flavors of love, and it seems to me that they have certain universal embodied features. So *metta* has that sense of radiant warmth. It feels like there's a warmth in the heart, and it spreads, and that's how the Buddha talks about it in the Metta Sutta, radiating kindness over the entire world, that quality of basic benevolence, goodwill, friendliness, care. It can be helpful rather than people trying to think their way into what that state would be like, one can both invoke these qualities, and they increasingly become the more natural resting places of the heart.

Compassion is the flavor of love in response to that which is painful, confronted by dukkha, one's own or somebody else's, or this dukkha of life. The felt sense of compassion is an ache in the heart. Compassion hurts, which is sometimes confusing for people, but no, it should hurt. It needs to hurt when we're confronted by pain. You see that when you see somebody being harsh with a child, for example, in the street and you feel the heart of their harshness. Sometimes people speak about metta and karuna, loving-kindness and compassion, almost interchangeably, and I think it's a really helpful discernment to make.

And then *mudita*, joy, delight. The way I describe it is as champagne in the heart. It has that fizzy quality, fizzy, fizzy, fizzy, and also not just fizzy champagne, but intoxicating. Joy is celebratory. It's the way love expresses itself in the face of beauty and those qualities, gratitude, wonder, delight, celebration. I find it really interesting that we use champagne for celebration. It seems to be a very good match for that quality of heart. That is pétillant, we say in French, fizzy, fizzy, celebratory.

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And then *upekkha*, or what’s usually called equanimity. I speak about in the book as having that felt sense, the embodied quality is one of space and vastness. From the word “equanimity” we sometimes get the sense of something flat, even. But actually, it’s not that we flatten out but more that we open up. The heart is big enough. There’s the sense that there’s room for it all, the ups and the downs, the thises and the thats, the details and the dramas, the way that if I want to love all of life, I need to make room for it all. I need to make room for all of its habits, comings and goings. So I explore them in different ways in the book, but those are the four embodied felt qualities that go with the different heart spaces.

Sharon Salzberg: That’s wonderful. Thank you.

James Shaheen: Yes, thank you, Martin. It’s a lovely way to end, although I wish we could continue. There are so many more questions. Thank you again for joining us. For our listeners, Martin’s book is *Awake Where You Are: The Art of Embodied Awareness*, available now through Amazon or your local bookstore. We like to close these episodes with a short meditation, so at this point, I’ll turn it over to Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, I was eager to turn it over to Martin.

James Shaheen: We can do that too. It’s up to you, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Is it OK with you?

Martin Aylward: Yeah, though I was looking forward to hearing from you.

James Shaheen: As you like. Go ahead, Martin.

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Martin Aylward: Alright. Well, having spoken about the belly, let's start just with a big breath or two. Let your belly fill up and then really let it soften as you breathe out, letting breath find its own movement, rhythm, and sensing down, down, down into the lowest place that you can feel the gentle expansion of the in-breath and the natural relaxation of the out-breath.

Simple, easeful. Whatever else is going on, whatever sensations are present or whatever the mind activity, just seeing if you can keep orientating in a simple way, a gentle way to a resting down into this breathing body, letting body sit, letting breath breathe, letting presence hold the experience of this moment, just like this.

Thank you both. I really appreciated our conversation and lively exchange. Thanks for inviting me.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much. Martin Aylward and Sharon Salzberg, it's great to be with you both. You've been listening to Martin Aylward on *Tricycle Talks*. We'd love to hear your thoughts about our podcast. Write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!