

• Chapter 3

• *The Unnatural Divorce*

MYSTICS in every spiritual tradition speak at length of the inner freedom that is our spiritual heritage. *Wholeness, oneness, connectedness, and awakening* are words used to attempt to describe a dimension of being that is essentially indescribable. They are words to describe a way of living that is an expression of reverence. It is a way of being that reveres the sacredness and dignity of all life, honors our Earth, and appreciates the implications of our fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness. Mystics speak of it as a fundamental inner awakening that empowers us to transform our world.

The language of the mystics has become foreign to us. The words they speak fall on deaf ears. They have become empty of meaning. We know the language of estrangement and separation. *Control, mastery, transcendence, domination, and success* are the words we use to describe our experience and our relationship with life. *Power over, isolation, competition, and alienation* describe the emptiness of this estranged life.

The path of the mystic is directed toward the end of conflict and suffering. It is the path of honoring the innate dignity and spirit of all life. It is the path of honoring oneness and truth above all else. It is a life committed to peace, harmony, and compassion. The mystic spurns domination and falsehood. She turns aside from exploitation and lives in accord with the oneness she perceives. Above all, she knows the emptiness of the division between inner and outer.

The practice of estrangement is a life without honor. The lines between “inner” and “outer” are clearly defined. Everything “outside” ourselves becomes an object, empty of innate spirit and unworthy of respect. The “outer” becomes subject to the rules of estrangement: objects to dominate, to exploit for our own gratification, to be controlled and subdued.

When estranged, we see the world as empty of spirit. Our response to the world is determined by the possibilities of threat or gratification we perceive in objects. We feel free to exploit the gratifying and to oppress the threatening.

Just as the erasure of the spirit from nature allows the estranged to rape Nature, the erasure of the spirit from human beings becomes the basis for exploitation, genocide, and hatred. Estrangement from the outer world is symptomatic of estrangement from the inner one. War veterans say it was possible for them to destroy the villages of Vietnamese peasants because they were "gooks." White racists exploit people of color because they consider them to be subhuman. Developers feel free to mindlessly abuse our ecology because it is inanimate. Similarly, women have been endlessly subordinated because of their "irrationality" and fundamental inferiority. The language of estrangement deafens our world. All of this represents a disconnection from inner spirit and dignity. The rules of domination and subjugation are applied inwardly to undermine our own well-being and wholeness. Our fairy tales are just one set of such rules. We are strangers to ourselves, divorced from knowing who we are. We become lost in our isolation and experience the effects of our estrangement in despair, alienation, and the paralysis of our creativity.

In our estrangement, we wear the blinkers of isolationism and become ineffective, powerless. We are unwilling to acknowledge that the pain of our world is only an echo of our own pain. We close our ears to the sounds of grief and anguish from the world, for to listen would inevitably be to perceive our connectedness and to respond appropriately. To live in accord with our understanding would imply radical changes in ourselves and in our lives. Perversely, we may be fearful of losing the very isolation that causes us agony. We become fearful of being deprived of our avenues of gratification and fearful of losing control.

Our fear makes withdrawal appear to be an easier option than being awake and connected. Our fear becomes our mantle of protection. It also deadens our capacity to empathize and respond. To acknowledge our connectedness is to feel the pain of the woman who grieves over the death of her starved child, the pain of the woman who weeps over the loss of her dreams and aspirations, and the anguish of the woman betrayed and exploited. The remoteness we experience lies only in the barriers we con-

struct. Hardened to pain, we are equally unreceptive to sharing in the joy of the woman giving birth, the woman rejoicing in her love and creativity.

A dimension of consciousness other than estrangement is possible for us. It is the consciousness of immanence and connectedness. A deep appreciation of the life-destroying consequences of estrangement inspires us to find ways of ending this unnatural divorce from ourselves and others. There are ingredients that are essential to this transformation. Awareness of the necessity and possibility of change is integral to the beginning of change. And I do not use the word *awareness* lightly. Change cannot be born of dullness or apathy! Trust in our own effectiveness is also essential. We need a vision of our own potential for freedom and a vision of how to integrate our understanding of oneness into our relationships, actions, and our very way of being on this Earth.

The degree to which we can connect with our world, empathize, and extend sensitivity rests upon the degree to which we can heal the pain of our divorce from ourselves. Our relationship to our own being is a microcosm of all our relationships. The degree of estrangement we experience inwardly is the extent of our estrangement from others.

Nurturing our own inner awareness is essential to a deepening of our vision of oneness. It is the beginning of our spiritual life. Such nurturing is more than an act of compassion for ourselves: it is an act of compassion toward our world. To learn to connect with and honor our own spirit and dignity is the beginning of learning to honor the spirit and dignity of all life.

Spirituality has frequently been condemned by activists and feminists as being irrelevant, if not contrary, to bringing about needed change. At times, spirituality is condemned as being an escape from and avoidance of issues that “really” matter. Women committed to the spiritual life are sometimes accused of supporting orders and traditions that essentially have only oppressed women and perpetuated estrangement. We need to consider whether these accusations themselves are not rooted in a dualistic way of seeing that separates the spiritual life from the political one.

Aspiring to a vision of connectedness is not a spirituality of narcissism or what some might call a defensive spirituality. The authentic mystic extends herself organically, bringing the light of her integrity into her social, sexual, and political relationships. She does not carry within herself the burdens of artificial boundaries that divorce her spiritual life from her social or political

life. Her vision of connectedness and her commitment to the actualization of that vision dissolves the boundaries of estranged seeing. She honors the sanctity of all life and is committed to its dignity.

The authentic mystic knows deeply and surely that, living within her body, she is sexual and honors the expressions of love, joy, and sensitivity that are made possible through her body. She is social and in each moment of her life she interacts with the world around her. She does not ignore a world that suffers and wars, but responds wholeheartedly with her wisdom and love. She is political because she is aware and a conscious participant in life. She is committed to the end of estrangement, which is the doctrine of too many of the structures and value systems that govern our lives. She is contemplative, rejoicing in the richness of her aloneness. She is alone and she is bonded with the world. Her abiding in her vision of connectedness dispels all seeming contradiction.

Although a spiritual quest is a turning inward to nurture awareness and explore the depths of our own consciousness, it is not a turning away from anything. The only valid spirituality is one that touches and illuminates every area of our lives. The “armchair” mystic who observes the struggles of the world from the complacency of her personal achievements pursues a spirituality that is empty of meaning. Suffering, seen from a vision of connectedness, is never an isolated experience. Nor is freedom a personal possession to be gained and hoarded. To commit ourselves in our spirituality to anything other than the end of all suffering and the arising of the freedom and dignity of all life, is to be untrue to the essence of spirituality.

We are easily fascinated and magnetized by the baubles and trophies of the spiritual life. The “mystical” experience, the “spiritual high,” “enlightenment,” and “transcendence” are concepts that excite us with their promise. When she was traveling the spiritual trail in Thailand, Sheila speaks of how impressed she was with the monastic life:

Everyone seemed so sincere and graceful. The chanting from the temple, the color of the monks’ robes, the silence and dignity of the nuns, the devotion of the lay people all deeply attracted me. I could hardly wait to shave my head, don my whites, and join the community of these enlightened people. The reality of sitting for hours with my legs aching and the sun blasting down on my baldness didn’t

quite fulfill my expectations of instant peace and wisdom. Contemplation wasn't always fun. In fact, boredom was initially my predominant experience. I felt resentful and angry when I had to face the reality that *being* enlightened was vastly different from appearing enlightened.

We can be so intent on pursuing the prizes of the spiritual life and, at times, personal glory that we forget that our spiritual insights are liberating only if they are integrated and applied. What value are our highs if we continue to live in an uncreative or insensitive way? What value our "experiences," no matter how impressive, if we still do not know how to live with dignity and compassion? How meaningful are our "spiritual" gains unless they teach us how to end conflict and live with integrity?

When I first began my own spiritual practice in Tibetan Buddhism, I remember how important it seemed to be invited to participate in the "initiations" that were periodically conducted by the senior monks. For each initiation, you were awarded a red string to wear around your neck, and these red strings were interpreted by the Westerners as being marks of spiritual progress. The Westerner walking around sporting layer upon layer of these rather grimy red strings was regarded with awe and admiration. It became something of a life-and-death issue to get those strings. The Tibetan monks never revealed to us whether or not they were laughing up the sleeves of their robes at the files of earnest and pious Westerners lining up for their initiations into the tantric arts. To us it was irrelevant that we neither understood the initiations (not speaking Tibetan) nor that many of us were totally unqualified to participate, lacking the spiritual training that would enable us to fulfill the commitments the initiations called for. What was important was to receive the badges that showed we were going somewhere.

This fascination with the trophies of the spiritual life is probably a necessary stage to go through. We have to be starstruck before we can land with our feet on the Earth. Going from naiveté to reality is as important to our spiritual maturity as going from dullness to awareness.

We live within an undeniable relationship to all life. In every moment of our lives, we influence the quality of the world we live in with our thoughts, feelings, and actions, and, in turn, are influenced by it. It is an inescapable

fact of our interdependence with life that just as we are nourished by the world, we also nourish it. This fundamental connectedness means that we cannot, in truth, separate ourselves from anything or anyone. Nurturing awareness of our fundamental connectedness with life, we begin our spiritual quest with a vision that is expansive and holistic.

Love and respect, for ourselves, for all beings, and for the planet we live on, are born of a vision of fundamental connectedness. It is love that impels us to external action, to extend ourselves in a way that is dedicated to the end of conflict. It is love that enables our own spiritual potential to unfold and be expressed fully. When we lack that profound vision of interconnectedness, our lives become dedicated to the pursuit of comfortable isolation, creating a personal and estranged world for ourselves, where the maximum amount of pleasure and gratification is generated and the maximum amount of challenge and pain avoided.

When our quest for the fulfillment of our potential is empty of this vision of connectedness, we create an inner world that is barren, and devoid of the healing and liberating power of love. We inhabit a safe—but desolate—landscape. Our spirituality becomes twisted in a way that perpetuates estrangement and pain. Strangers to ourselves and others, we attempt to create a cocoon of spiritual safety to shelter in.

A woman came to me exhausted by the quality of her life and her intimate relationships. Her home life was a battleground, filled with tension and violence. She was the scapegoat for her husband's and children's suppressed anger. She said, "I desperately need to find some peace, some way of enduring all of this, some calmness. Would you teach me how to meditate?" I gave her some simple methods to enhance her awareness and connect with what she was actually experiencing inwardly. Two weeks later, she returned, absolutely furious with me. She explained that she had followed my instructions diligently, and she was so angry. All she experienced were deep waves of rage and fury for the injustice of her family's treatment of her. She said, "All I wanted was peace, not this awareness that is so disturbing."

It is upsetting for us to discover that the price of safety is, at times, numbness and dullness. It is disturbing to discover that the path of awareness is not always a path of bliss. It is a hard lesson to learn that we cannot bypass who we actually are to gain our spiritual trophies. It is an even more difficult les-

son to learn that we cannot ignore the quality of our world nor our relationship with it to gain our spiritual successes. Estranged from a vision of connectedness, we only perpetuate division and conflict.

The fear, born of estrangement, leads us to draw clear lines of division between "me" and "you." Collectively, this becomes the division between "us" and "them." These lines of division are the breeding ground for prejudice, alienation, and exploitation. The unconscious acceptance of this estrangement is experienced inwardly as alienation from our own feelings and potential. Our vision of ourselves becomes dependent upon the material and psychological props that form the boundaries of our personal worlds. They are the paper houses in which our fragile sense of identity rests. We possess, we believe, and thus we are "someone." We fear the intrusion of anything that threatens our props and belief systems. Our very security and self-worth rely upon remaining unthreatened. The twin tyrants of defensiveness and aggressiveness become the forces that govern our lives and perpetuate our divorce from ourselves.

Spiritual awakening is freeing ourselves from this unnatural divorce from ourselves and our world. But if our spiritual quests are to unfold in a way that awakens us to our connectedness it is essential that the forms and expression of spirituality are free from doctrines of estrangement and false dualities. We cannot divorce the emphasis of the paths we follow from the ends to which we aspire.

A vision of connectedness cannot be born of practices and teachings that, overtly or covertly, emphasize duality and separation. Our visions of spirituality and of our own possibilities are influenced, in subtle and in obvious ways, by the teachings and guidance we absorb. If we are to discover a spiritual vision that is liberating, we need to be willing to question and discard all notions of dualistic seeing and the value systems that perpetuate them.

Few spiritual traditions are willing to confront their prejudices against women. We turn to established traditions in search of paths to the end of estrangement, in search of answers to the questions we hold about the connectedness we sense. In that turning, women meet a wall of cultural conditioning and fear that has been transferred to spirituality. In that transference, age-old prejudice has been accorded a sacred truthfulness.

Having gone to the East to undertake a prolonged retreat in a monastery

that emphasized intensive meditation, Andrea was allocated a space on the porch of a building, which she shared with six other women. She was assigned kitchen duties, filtering the drinking water for the monks and cleaning the rice. After participating in the monastery's daily rituals and completing her assigned chores, she usually had an hour or two for her own practice. Worse, this was frequently interrupted by groups of local people who came to gaze upon the unusual phenomenon of a woman engaging in intensive practice. Dispirited, she went to a Western monk to express what seemed to her to be just grievances. The monk regarded her with surprise and proceeded to extol the virtues of her life to her. He said, "I feel you don't really appreciate your good fortune in being here as a woman. You should be grateful for this wonderful opportunity you have to practice humility and selflessness. It's an opportunity that's sadly not available to us monks."

A woman who respects herself and who directs her life to bringing about wholeness and freedom simply cannot establish a spiritual home in any tradition where she is not valued for who she is and what she offers. She is mature enough to know the difference between authentic selflessness and self-negation. She knows that there are many things to be let go of in her quest for freedom, but that inner trust and dignity are not among them.

There are few stories of women's awakening to guide us. Few spiritual traditions are directed by women. Few of the images and models we encounter bear the marks of women. We follow behind the authority figures who define our spirituality and we remain a shadow, if not invisible.

We once spoke in a beseeching voice, begging for the recognition of our worth and spirit. But the tone of our voice is changing. As we acknowledge our own spiritual heritage, we refuse to be cowed or subdued by authorities who refuse to celebrate our spiritual heritage with us. The threats and injunctions that have previously served to quiet our voices are no longer effective.

In the West, the bonding of women strengthens individual women in their quest to reclaim their spiritual heritage. The voices of women in diverse traditions merge to celebrate the discovery of an inner vision of freedom that endures no sanction. The church which has been eternally male-dominated will find itself only male-inhabited if it attempts to continue to justify its refusal to change. In the East and Third World countries, change

will be slower as problems of communication and social freedom inhibit the bonding of women. But change will be sure or the monasteries too will find themselves exposed to the need to avail themselves of the opportunity for service and humility by serving themselves.

Our own religious conditioning has bound us to subservient, powerless positions. Simultaneously, it has inhibited our connecting with the voice of the inner mystic, who speaks the truth of our spiritual heritage. We may be courageous in rejecting and discarding any manifestation of prejudice and inequality in our social and professional lives. Yet as novices in our spiritual development, we may be afraid to articulate the doubts and questions that arise in relationship to spiritual conditioning. When accused of pride, or of desiring honor, or of a lack of spiritual depth, we easily begin to doubt the truth of our own doubts.

While we as individuals may be newly awakening to the spiritual significance of connectedness, we need to acknowledge that women as a group are not novices in their spiritual awareness. Women throughout time have shared a common spiritual heritage of connectedness. It is a history that has survived every effort to negate it. Witches, healers, midwives, goddess devotees, and now many contemporary feminists seek to ground their actions, their desires for change, and themselves in a vision of connectedness. In recognizing the truth of connectedness, we are empowered to articulate our doubts and trust in our power to transform ourselves and our world.

Cultural prejudices and dualisms that have been transferred to spirituality will end only when we no longer consent to them. Their continuation can only perpetuate estrangement and dichotomies that are destructive. Men may seem to profit from the dualisms that are promoted, but essentially they are detrimental to both men and women, divorcing both from the connectedness they share.

One such policy of estrangement has become the fundamental teaching of many spiritual traditions and belief systems. It is the dichotomy of "spiritual" versus "worldly." In it, the "inner" and the "outer," "humankind" and "nature" are polarized and specific values are attributed to them. The spiritual life is deemed to be strived for, while the worldly life is decreed to be inferior, to be transcended. Humankind is considered to be of primary significance; nature is valued only for its capacity to serve us. The inner is considered sacred and the outer of doubtful value.

What is this worldly life—so easily dismissed—composed of? Bonding and caring for one another, generating life, directing and creating our social and political lives with sensitivity and wisdom, and rejoicing and despairing with others—this is the worldly life that is held in contempt. Have we considered what the outer is that is so glibly disregarded in pursuit of the sacred inner? It is the life and spirit of our planet, and the degree of struggle and suffering experienced by those we share our planet with. Do we honor the interdependence that exists between ourselves and our planet when we divorce ourselves from the nature that supports and nurtures us?

We live in a world of immense suffering and struggle, and the divorce of spirituality from the world has not contributed to bringing about the end of the violence and alienation that characterize it. Spiritual growth must open our eyes and our hearts. Solomon Ibn Gavirol, the Jewish-Arabic poet and philosopher of Islamic Spain, wisely says, “Of what avail the open eye if our hearts are blind?” To withdraw from the world, to practice a path of estrangement, is life-denying and a negation of the essence of spirituality, which is to end pain. Passive negation and withdrawal degenerate into rejection and denial. A spiritual acolyte once said to me, “I used to feel guilty about my lack of commitment to social and political change. Now that I have deepened my spiritual commitment, I see that I can’t do anything about the karma of the world. It’s more important to seek my own enlightenment.” This same person felt herself to be practicing boundless joy and compassion for all beings. Even if this is true, it is apparent to me that our world is desperately in need of far fewer closet Buddhas.

We need to consider what we lose in the practice of estrangement. The capacity to be touched by and empathize with one another is sacrificed. In closing our hearts to the world, we also close our hearts to the richness of our own love and compassion. Lost in our estrangement, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to be enriched by the very grist of life. A vision of immanence and connectedness dissolves the constructed boundaries between inner and outer. The understanding that the inner is the outer and the outer is the inner transforms our psyche.

A spiritual path lies not in any specific mode of existence, but in the openness of appreciating the spiritual potential of each moment. Within the symphony of our being, we hear the sounds of both harmony and disharmony. With a consciousness of connectedness, we can embrace the array of sounds

within us, learn from them, and utilize the possibilities for understanding they offer. With a consciousness of estrangement, we polarize the variety of voices we hear. Inner fragmentation begins. We superimpose our values of superior and inferior upon qualities within ourselves. We try to control, subdue, or negate the inferior while pursuing the profitability of the superior.

The dualities we project on to the world are but reflections of deeply rooted dualities that exist within ourselves. There are clear links between the contempt in which we hold nature and the contempt in which we hold our own bodies. The destructive value systems that define our bodies and sexuality as being sinful and worthless are externalized. They become associated with nature and all form in order to justify the abuse of both.

We are not born into this world in neatly compartmentalized packages labeled Mind, Body, and Emotion. We are born as integral, if immature, individuals. Our growth and the expanding of our awareness entails gaining new skills and knowledge that are liberating. It also entails accumulating prejudices and conditioned values about ourselves that are fragmenting.

Absorbing cultural prejudices, we become divorced from the spirit and value of our own bodies. We learn to be secretive about and ashamed of our bodies and their functions. Yet we learn, too, the importance of appearing to be pretty and desirable. Our sexuality matures and we learn to call its expression a curse. Yet we learn, too, that our sexuality attracts interest and affection. Our bodies are our first home, yet it is so difficult to feel at ease within them, burdened as we are by the conflicting messages we receive about them.

We carry with us the traumas of our childhood and adolescence experienced in relationship to our bodies: too thin, too fat; too flat-chested, too big-breasted; too tall, too short; we are rarely, if ever, acceptable to ourselves. We are ridiculed or approved of on the basis of our appearance, and we learn that our bodies are our tickets to approval or rejection. We are either loved or lonely depending upon the appearance of our bodies, which we are unable to control fully, despite our contortions.

Learning that love is seemingly won through our desirability, we endeavor to turn ourselves into attractive ornaments in the marketplace of relationship. The god of desirability is difficult to please. To earn acceptance, we engage in endless occupations to mold ourselves into models of desirability. The "mirror-hours" that women have collectively put in hold

sufficient energy to change the world. Instead, they have generated only endless frustration and self-negation.

A woman may find some measure of success in modifying her body to conform to current standards of desirability, only to discover that this, in turn, is interpreted as an invitation to violate by those whom she wanted to please. Exploitation and rape are dismissed because, after all, she asked for it. We blame ourselves for the violations we suffer or remain silent for fear of being blamed by others. This willingness to accept blame underlines the shame we feel in our own bodies. We feel guilty about presenting ourselves in ways that we are trained and expected to do by our culture. Women, estranged from the dignity of their own bodies, collaborate in the social expectations to display their desirability to win affection. Too often, all that is won is the identity of being a trophy possessed by another.

Behind the scenes of all these exchanges there lurk the age-old and deeply rooted messages that essentially our bodies are impure and shameful, our sexuality is sinful, and our femininity a temptation to be conquered. The impressions upon our consciousness based upon the messages we receive and absorb are undermining and destructive.

We internalize the feedback we receive from other people, we absorb the social expectations, and we learn to be manipulative, passive, dependent, and competitive. We become further estranged from our innate dignity and integrity. Our inner sense of respect, trust, and worth is undermined, if not entirely suffocated, and we begin to exist only for others. Fiona speaks of the role her relationship played in the process of negating herself:

I was born with the burden of prettiness. I was the epitome of the beautiful child: blonde ringlets, long eyelashes, and an enticing smile. My parents called me their princess and loved to show me off to whoever would look. They were so proud of me. I was the living proof of their ability to produce perfection. I was never dirty: in school, I never participated in anything that would mar the perfection of my clothes. I was a china doll.

It didn't change as I grew up. I was the envy of all the other girls, and the boys gathered around me like bees to honey. My prettiness guaranteed recognition and praise, from being the teacher's pet to someone everyone wanted for their best friend. I was in love with my

own popularity. When my women friends began to be interested in the feminist movement, I dismissed them as man-haters. I couldn't join them because my whole life revolved around the admiration by and pursuit of men. When I was thirty, I got breast cancer, and my whole world fell apart. I felt suicidal after my mastectomy. It wasn't just my body that was scarred: I felt totally worthless. It was a slow path to being healed. I can look in the mirror now with my eyes open, and I see more than the outer scars on my body. Do you know I have even learned to love and respect myself?

The very first step toward ending estrangement is reclaiming our bodies. We do not need to flee our bodies to pursue our spirit. Rather, we need to honor our spirit within our bodies. To be a disembodied spirit negates a human spirituality. We must not live just enduring our bodies, but within our bodies, caring for and honoring them as the visible expression of our spirituality.

Learning to value everything about being a woman is the key to a connected spirituality. The reconciliation between body and spirit is the key to the reconciliation of humankind and nature. Our bodies are neither weapons to be used to win approval nor tickets to acceptance and affirmation. The very rhythms of our bodies celebrate the rhythms of nature, the seasons of our bodies are the seasons of our world. When we abandon our prejudices, we become intimate with the fundamental and intuitive responses of our bodies. A nursing mother may sometimes lactate at the sound of a suffering animal, our hearts open with compassion in response to pain, and our bodies quicken in joy at the sound of a delighted child. In listening to the sounds and responses of our own bodies, we listen to life and there is rapport and connectedness in that listening. "Every act and gesture is a word spoken. We are not overspiritualizing our view of sex when we say that every sexual act, feeling, or emotion has the power to become a disclosure of spirit to spirit. Sexuality is never something by itself. It is always meaning incarnate."¹

As a vehicle for the expression of sensitivity and love, inwardly and outwardly, we cannot treasure the wisdom of our bodies too much. As long as we are dispossessed from our own bodies, we establish our sense of identity in the expectations of others. The divorce from our bodies, with its ensuing

conflicts, is reflected in separation and alienation from other people and the world we share. The resolution of this conflict can only be in learning new ways of relating to ourselves, based not upon prejudice or conditioned values, but upon self-knowledge and inner connection.

Historically, spirituality has actively participated in the prejudice against and rejection of the body. In certain established religious traditions, women are made invisible, swathed in voluminous uniforms to protect both themselves and others from temptation and desire. Our own confused relationship with our bodies is reinforced through the reminder that it was through our bodies, our sexuality, that there was banishment from paradise. There are theologians aplenty to remind us, "You are the door of Satan; you are the one that yielded to the temptation of the tree; you are the first deserter of the law of God; you persuaded man whom Satan himself had not the power to subdue; with irresponsibility you led man, the image of God, astray!"²

We learn that our bodies, our tickets to success in social prestige and acceptability, are not our tickets to salvation, but its opposite. Our own history of despising our bodies is matched by the contempt in which traditional spirituality holds the body. In the Buddhist tradition, reflection is encouraged upon the inherent impurity and loathsomeness of the body. Detachment from our bodies is to be cultivated, lest we fall prey to the snares of our sexuality. The degeneration of this detachment is underlined by the story of a mother who traveled halfway around the world to visit her son, living as a monk in Thailand, whom she had not seen for several years. She was not permitted to embrace him and express her joy in seeing him because it offended the vows he had taken. Vows meant to constrain passion equally constrained all physical expression of love.

Our bodies are despised because they are the vessels of our sexuality. Our sexuality is perceived as a power we need to subdue lest it overwhelm our rationality and reason. Our bodies become the scapegoats for our fear of sexuality, and in our fear, we attempt to control them, dismiss them, and suppress them. In our pursuit of a disembodied spirituality, our bodies become regarded as sources of attachment and temptation and our spiritual success is measured by our capacity to renounce, overcome, and transcend them. The destructiveness to women born of this distorted relationship to the body is apparent and is perpetuated in estranged spirituality.

Radical mystics of the past and present have consistently challenged the

divorce of the spirit from our bodies and sexuality. In *What Is Love?*, Jules Toner describes a vision of a connected spirituality: "When we love we are present to the beloved and they, present to us, in coexistence, physically, intellectually, spiritually, with affection and passion as co-forms of presence."³ The weight of our guilt and conditioning overrides the messages of oneness, both outer and inner, that mystics speak of.

In estranged spirituality, the obstacle of the body is renamed and misnamed the obstacle of "woman." Carrying the blame for original sin, woman is to be punished eternally by being banished from any authentic form of acknowledgment by, or participation in, established religion. Women are punished for their weakness by exploitation and oppression. The symbol of the temptress Eve permeates our culture, a living symbol repeated in the media, in literature, and in religious teaching.

The Buddha offered new possibilities of liberation to women in teaching a spiritual vision that offered freedom to all beings. Yet despite his original teaching, the taints of estranged values crept in to distort Buddhism.⁴ A dialogue attributed doubtfully to the Buddha defines the relationship of monks to women. The promoted attitude was as follows:

"How are we to conduct ourselves, Lord, with regard to womankind?"

"As if not seeing them, Ananda."

"But if we should see them, what are we to do?"

"Do not talk, Ananda."

"But if they should speak to us, Lord, what should we do?"

"Keep awake, Ananda."

The important point here is not whether the Buddha actually made this statement or whether it was made by a later misogynist and attributed to the Buddha. It is that such statements are sufficiently believed in to form the basis of prevailing attitudes toward women.

Women become the scapegoats for the inability to relate to the body and to sexuality with respect and sensitivity. Internalizing the messages received through social and spiritual values, women learn to belittle their spiritual potential. They adopt a stance of passivity, accepting the spiritual banishment decreed to them, regarding themselves as inferior and unworthy

spiritual beings, exiled from an authentic spiritual fulfillment. Is it then any surprise that in Eastern Buddhist countries it is a commonly held belief that a woman must wait to be reborn as a man before she can attain enlightenment? She is, meanwhile, encouraged to work toward this worthy goal by accumulating merit through serving with selflessness and humility the patriarchal structure.

I remember the elation I felt when, during my own practice in the East, I was praised for the consistency and intensity of my practice. I remember the horror and despair I felt when the same praise was tempered by the monk's words of regret: "It's really a shame you had the misfortune to be born a woman. But you can feel glad because your dedication to your meditation will surely give you enough merit so you don't have a lower rebirth next time. You're sure to be born in a place where you have the opportunity to become a monk."

The estrangement from our bodies becomes the basis for rejecting life. It separates us from nature and the communion and bonding with others that our hearts yearn for. We learn to feel guilty about our need for connection and misname it spiritual weakness. The yearning to bear and nurture our children, to care for our planet, and to creatively establish our relationship with it are perceived as worldly attachments. In our estrangement, we attempt to subdue them. Through our denial, we come to inhabit an inner landscape that is barren and heartless. We become frustrated and brutal toward ourselves in our suppression of our yearnings for connectedness. This inner brutality and frustration is then projected outwardly in aggression, and in rejection and denial of our world.

A spirituality that embraces our bodies and sexuality is not a narcissistic indulgence in these things, but a celebration of their power to form bonds of communion and connection with all life. Exorcising our feelings of guilt, shame, and inferiority opens the door to establishing a relationship with our bodies—and, indeed, with all the varied manifestations of life—that is creative, appreciative, and loving. Healing our divided selves is born of deep insight, an inner seeing in which there is no rejection or denial, but an appreciation that our bodies are vehicles for learning, understanding, and sensitivity. Rejection is no less a hindrance to spiritual growth than neurotic attachment. Aversion is no less a hindrance than clinging. Banishing the alien presence of prejudice from our own psyche, we can reclaim our

bodies and nurture and appreciate their power as vehicles of love and compassion.

Instructed to develop detachment from her body because it was impure, decaying, and unable to bring forth anything of beauty, Sara felt sure enough of her own experience and conviction to be able to challenge her teacher. She denied this myth, saying, "You have missed a great deal in life. So much of beauty has been born of my body. Their names are Joseph, Serene, and Katherine."

A fundamental step in nurturing a spirituality of connectedness is establishing a rapport and reconciliation among the variety of inner dynamics that make each of us a unique and whole individual. In a belief in estrangement, we divorce ourselves from nature. We divorce our spirit from our body and this process of inner fragmentation is supported by our distorted value systems. The process of fragmentation has its own momentum and continues. We create yet further divisions between our mind and our emotions, and between our intellect and our capacity to feel. Calling upon familiar value systems to support this unnatural divorce, we strengthen the divisions within us.

Our minds are seen to be the receptacles of wisdom, the owners of understanding: reasonable, strong, and reliable. Emotion is deemed to be irrational, weak, and untrustworthy. Emotion is attributed to the heart, and reason to the mind; the heart is defined as feminine, and the mind as masculine; the feminine as weak, and the masculine as strong. We are encouraged in our culture to cultivate the power of our minds. The achievement of the goals that our society deems to be worthy relies upon the capacity to evaluate, to be rational and strong in our intellect. We are equally encouraged to dismiss, suppress, or simply "get over" the emotions we experience. But the presence and influence of our emotions are a powerful dynamic that cannot be ignored. Meister Eckhart, a fifteenth-century mystic, touches upon the destructiveness of this belief in disregarding the relevance of emotions:

For all the truth the authorities ever learned by their own intelligence and understanding, or ever shall learn up to the last of days, they never got the least part of the knowledge that is in the core. Let it be called ignorance or want of knowledge, still it has more in it than all wisdom

and all knowledge without it, for this outward ignorance lures and draws you away from things you know about and even from yourself.

The effects on an individual and global level born of this negation and dismissal of emotion are apparent. Suppression, oppression, aggression, alienation, exploitation, psychosomatic illness, and psychological imbalance are rampant in our world. We wreak havoc and destruction upon ourselves and our world through the estrangements we believe in.

Imbalance is created within the psyche of each individual who bears the prejudice of these divisions. It is an imbalance that governs our relationship with all life. The healing of the world we live in begins with the healing of the imbalances we carry within ourselves. It is not enough to worship the god of reason or the goddess of feeling. There needs to be an authentic reconciliation among the variety of dynamics we experience. To experience the interrelatedness of our inner dynamics is to experience a harmony and rapport that enriches every area of our lives.

All that we truly need for this transformation lies within ourselves and within the present moment. Spiritual fulfillment relies not upon the rejection or denial of anything, but upon the discarding of prejudice and destructive belief systems. The myth of estrangement relies upon fear and denial. The unnatural divorces we endure rely upon the ignorance of our fundamental connectedness. The eternal alimony we pay for this estrangement is suffering and pain.

An integral step in the unfolding of connectedness is the willingness to question all forms of prejudice and the courage to discard them. That questioning allows us to meet ourselves, our entire selves, not through the filters of conditioned value systems, but with eyes that seek only the truth. Only dedication to that which is true will liberate us. A true spirituality is revolutionary in that it supports no falsehood. The falseness of estrangement in all its dimensions is revealed through our own dedication to truth and freedom. Abiding in a vision of connectedness, we abide with integrity, dignity, and love. We are spiritual, social, and political, for our connectedness recognizes no boundaries.

Meditation on Oneness * * *

Settle into a comfortable position, and allow your eyes to close. Let your attention move through your body, relaxing and letting go of any tension or holding that you sense. Just be aware of the stillness of your body, and allow your whole being to merge into that stillness.

Bring your attention to your breath, simply being aware of the whole movement of your breath from its beginning to its end. Let your breath find its own rhythm and depth: do not control it in any way. Allow yourself to trust in the rhythm of your breath, allowing your breath just to breathe itself. Let go of any inner voices that censor your breathing with messages of your breath not being full enough or tense. Let your breath find its own way in your body.

Be aware of the qualitative difference between *watching* your breath and *feeling* your breath in your body. Feel your breath in your body, and feel your body responding to your breath. Feel the expansion and contraction of your body with each breath, receiving with your awareness the movement of life within your body. Allowing yourself to merge in oneness with your breath, breathe in with sensitivity, and breathe out with sensitivity; breathe in with receptivity, and breathe out with receptivity.

As you merge yourself in harmony with your breath, allow yourself to feel the pulse of your life in your breath; feel the pulse of all life within your breath. Feel yourself being nourished by the world with each incoming breath; feel yourself nourishing the world with each breath you release.

Begin to open your attention in order to be aware of your whole body. Beginning at the top of your head, gently and slowly move your attention down through your whole body, touching with sensitivity every area of your body with your attention. Free of resistance or holding, simply open yourself to feeling the different sensations that arise and pass in your body, touching equally with your attention areas of your body that offer no sensation and cultivating an unconditional openness and sensitivity to your body as it is in this moment. Embrace your body with a gentle, loving attention. No need to label your body or any sensation that arises in your body: the body has no label or judgment. Allow yourself to merge, to be one with the sensations in your body as they arise. Just continue that receptive movement of attention down through your entire body.

Be aware that as you connect with the life of your own body, you connect with all life; as you are at one with your own body, you are at one with all of life. Just as your body asks you to answer its needs for sensitivity, for nourishment, for warmth, and for care, all of life is nurtured by that same care and sensitivity. The yearnings of your body to be free from harm and pain are yearnings that you share with all of life.

Being still within your body, feeling the waxing and waning of life as it expresses itself in sensation, just open yourself to being present with your body. Allow that openness and receptivity to embrace the different thoughts, images, memories, and plans that arise in your consciousness. Be aware of how you move toward or away from the different thoughts and feelings that arise. Allow them to arise and to pass without prejudice, without control, and without any judgment. Be aware not only of the thoughts but the space between the thoughts. Be aware of the space that holds your thoughts and feelings, and merge with the openness and vastness of that space.

As you feel that spaciousness within, all that you need to do is listen, with receptivity and with softness. Assume no stance of judgment, of being for or against. Strive for no models or goals. Just allow yourself to be present and to listen inwardly. Merging your whole being into that stillness of receptivity, let the present moment and all that it embraces unfold.

In that spaciousness and stillness, be aware of the transparency of the line between inner and outer. The stillness and spaciousness you feel within surrounds you and holds you. It is not separate from movement or sound: it is in and through all movement and sound. In this moment, you connect with what is held in all of time, past, present, and future. In the life you feel in your breath is held all of life. The sensations you feel mirror the sensations of the universe. Just allow yourself to be still: the interconnectedness you experience is the thread of interconnectedness that bonds all of life.

As you listen inwardly, the thoughts and feelings you receive mirror all thought and feeling. The sorrow you feel mirrors the sorrow of countless generations of life. The joy you feel is echoed in the hearts of all life when there is freedom from pain and fear. The grief you experience in loss and separation is shared by the world. The love that nourishes you nourishes the universe.

Simply be present and listen. Be gentle in that stillness, and know the strength and openness of connectedness, of oneness.