

Grounding

The Power of Embodied Presence
for Awakening, Managing Stress, and Living Your Life

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Grounding:

The Power of Embodied Presence for
Awakening, Managing Stress, and Living Your Life
(Version 1.1)

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Introduction

Settled. Solid. Stable. Here. Connected.

It's a feeling, an experience, that sometimes comes our way. It can settle upon us by grace, perhaps in a moment when we're sitting on a beach looking out at an ocean or hiking and taking in a mountain vista. Or it may come upon us by our setting out to create the circumstances where it can be born, perhaps through meditating or practicing a body-mind discipline like yoga or tai chi.

When we're fully in our bodies, we feel *here*. Present in ourselves and present in our surroundings. Being present in this way isn't about being present *only* in our bodies. When we feel present and settled in our bodies in this way, our mind and our feelings also have that settled, calm, and present quality. Though we are here in our bodies when we are fully present in this way, we also feel that we are present in some deeper and more essential way. That is, we feel grounded and present in our deeper self, in our soul, or in spirit. **These experiences tell us that grounding isn't just about the body. Though when and we are in the experience, it naturally includes the body.** We have bodies, but many of us don't live in them!

While these spontaneous experiences of being grounded are wonderful gifts, the reality is that we are, perhaps, **most often aware of what it's like not to be grounded.** That is, we're aware that we feel stressed, tense, overwhelmed, out of sorts, anxious, worried, unfocused, or indecisive.

So, we start with where we are! **Grounding practices help us settle when we are stressed and overwhelmed.** That's the first step. Over time, and with practice, we develop the capacity to be grounded in ongoing ways.

Thus, you can think of the exercises in this book as a valuable resource to, first, **help you recover a sense of grounded presence** when you are stressed, and, second, **build ongoing resilience and stability** through the practice of simple regular grounding exercises.

In this book, we begin the practice of grounding by focusing on bodily experience, though it can and does encompass *much* more than that. In fact, grounding through bodily awareness is a very direct route to deeper experiences of self and the world – a topic we touch on later in the book.

The contents of this book have their origins (are grounded!) in my studies in somatic psychotherapy, bioenergetic analysis, awareness and meditative practices, and other body-mind disciplines. All of these are integrated into my work as a psychologist, psychotherapist, consultant, and teacher of body-mind-awareness skills.

This book contains concrete practices that can help you return to a resourceful and grounded state when you are stressed out. Since they are *practices*, you must *do* them to get the benefit! You can't just read about them. In addition, you will find some suggestions for working with grounding in ongoing ways, in daily life – so you can increasingly reside in a sense of grounded and present resourcefulness.

Readers will find in the appendix valuable resources for further exploring practices and experiences related to grounding.

Enjoy the journey!

Dr. Charles Martin

What is Grounding?

To ground is to be present - in the here and now of what is happening in and around you. To ground is to be in the now of your body, of the earth, and of your environment - feeling their support, and feeling the resourcefulness that comes from that experience. Grounding is a fundamental body, feeling, and mental skill that keeps us viscerally in touch with a sense of stability, resilience, and capability.

When we are ungrounded, we feel stressed, overwhelmed, anxious, and out of touch with ourselves and the world.

When we are grounded, we feel more stable, centered, capable, content, and resilient. We feel able to deal with what is happening both inside and outside of us. We have a sense of “*Ahh... I can do this. It’s going to be OK.*” When we are grounded, we can have our strong feelings and know we’ll be alright. Things may be hectic in our lives, and we know we’ll be able to navigate them – even if we don’t know exactly how yet.

In addition, when we are grounded, we can experience the vitality of who we are - both in our pleasures and our pains - and *contain or express that vitality* in ways that feel stable and in line with our sense of ourselves. We are rooted in our body, in the earth and have branches and leaves in our relationships with the environment, with others, and with the deeper core/essence of life.

Grounding – as the basic practice – involves being aware of what is happening right now in your body and your experience. You will be asked, over and over, to return to awareness of what is currently happening in your body, sensations, and feeling. When we work with grounding, we don’t just move our bodies into particular positions – we *work with bringing our awareness to our embodied experience.*

We begin with the body because we have commonly gotten out of touch with the reality of our bodily experience. We spend a lot of time thinking, high up in our heads, and consequently, we forget about the bodies that we also *are*. The bodies that are an integral part of our nature. And so, returning to the experience of ourselves as *physical* beings – that is, returning to the physical experience of our bodies – can be a healing and reintegrating salve to the discomfort and scatteredness that is part of living in our heads. Grounding in the sensations of our bodies

can reduce the noise of thinking and help us become aware of a *variety* of new sensations, including the vital energies that move in and through our body.

Grounding can provide us with a tool for stress management, can build our resourcefulness in everyday life, and further can be a practice that supports our personal development and awakening to our true selves. For the moment, and in this work, we begin with grounding as a fundamental tool to help us deal with stress, strong feelings, and to help us feel more resourceful.

Grounding as an embodied psychospiritual practice is ultimately about resting in the Ground of Being, or resting in the awareness that we fundamentally *are*. We will touch on this topic later in the book. It is about moving from mindful awareness of what is happening right to *resting* in awareness itself. With practice, by returning over and over again to the sense of being awareness itself – we discover a sense of groundedness in whatever is happening. In whatever arises in our awareness and experience.

The insight into the always already *thereness* of awareness, the insight that we *are* that – this insight may come in a flash, spontaneously, at any time. Still, the insight becomes evermore rooted in our hearts and our physical experience. And because many of us our out of touch with the direct experience of our bodies, there is enormous value in *exploring the experience* of grounding in our bodies, first.

Remember, grounding isn't *only* about being in the body, but that is where we start here. We bring awareness to what is happening – right now – in our bodies. Specifically, we are bringing *mindful* awareness to the body. That is, we gently keep our awareness on our body, the sensations/feelings, up close, and without trying to analyze the feeling or change it. The sensation is as it is. This is bringing mindful awareness to your bodily experience.

Exercise: Standing – Aware of Body, Gravity, Breathing

- Begin in a natural standing position, with your toes facing forward.
 - Let your feet be about shoulder-width apart with your arms hanging naturally at your sides – and let your knees be slightly bent.
 - Become aware of the sensations of gravity in your body.
 - Let your awareness sweep down from the top of your head down to your feet. Simply be aware of the pull of gravity in your body, the feeling of the different parts of your body - and your body as a whole being acted on by gravity.
 - When thoughts and feelings arise in your mind, just let them be and gently bring your awareness over and over to the *sensation* of your body. And particularly the sensations in your body that tell you gravity is acting on you.
 - You may notice the weight of clothing on your body. You may notice the pull of gravity in particular muscles, are where one part of your body contacts another part.
 - Feel what you feel without trying to change it. Feel any heaviness. Feel any lightness. Feel any blankness. Feel any comfort. Feel any discomfort.
 - Inhabit your body – that is, be *in* the sensations as they are.
 - As many times as you like, let your awareness take in your bodily sensation.
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- Now bring your awareness to your breathing, to the sensation of it – as it is. You don't need to modify your breathing. But if you do modify it, that's OK, and just let that be there too.
 - Do that for a little while.
 - Now expand your breathing so that when you breathe in, your belly expands, and then your chest expands. Then let your body exhale as it wishes. Continue in the same way.
 - Now, notice both the sensation of gravity acting in your body, and also let yourself be aware of the sensation of your breathing.
 - Aware of body, sensation, gravity, breathing. That's it. Just that.
 - Be in this experience for as long as you like, and then end it when you want.

This is the basic body, breathing, and awareness grounding practice. Its purpose is to return you to the here-and-now experience of your body. Tuning into sensation, gravity, and breathing are an important part of returning us to the felt reality of being embodied.

You can start every standing exercise here. Over time it will also provide you with information (via sensation-feeling) about just *how* you are stressed, and how you may be resisting your current experience.

Exercise: The Forward Bend - Letting Go and Feeling Support

- Begin in a natural standing position.
- Turn your toes slightly inward. This will help relax your buttocks.
- Start with a minute or two of the Basic Grounding Exercise: “Standing – Aware of Body, Gravity, Breathing”
- Now, let gravity slowly (SLOWLY) pull your head and shoulders forward - and let yourself curl downward into a position where your head, arms, shoulders are dangling while your legs hold you up.
- During this slow-motion movement, be aware of the sensation of gravity acting in your body pulling you forward and down.
- Don’t be concerned with whether your fingers touch the ground or not. This is not a callisthenic and there is no physical goal to accomplish. *Don’t push*. Let gravity do the work and stay aware of the sensations in your body.
- Note that you may be holding your breath – and remind yourself to breathe. At any point in this exercise, if you notice you are holding your breath, just pick up breathing again and continue. Let breathing happen – you don’t have to breathe in a particular way.
- Notice the sensations associated with the pull of gravity and with the movement of your breathing.
- While you are dangling, see if you are holding/tensing in the muscles of your head and neck. Notice if you are resisting “letting your head go.” Let gravity take your head. Keep breathing. Notice the sensations.
- Notice if you are holding/tensing in your arms or shoulders. Let your arms and shoulders go. Let gravity have them. Keep breathing. Notice the sensations.
- Finally, notice the sensations in your legs. Be aware *in* your legs. Inhabit your legs. Feel the sensations in your legs – in your thighs, calves, ankles, feet. Feel the sensation of gravity pulling you down through your legs and through the soles of your feet. Feel your legs supporting your body. Keep breathing. Let sensations be as they are.
- Try straightening your knees a bit so the hamstrings are stretched. Don’t lock your knees! Try slowly flexing your knees (a little) and straightening (a little) until you feel tension. Hang out there and breathe. You may notice a little vibration/shake in your legs. That’s perfectly natural!
- After a minute or so of this forward dangle, push gently into your feet and feel yourself slowly (SLOWLY) uncurl upward - starting with the lower spine first. Your upper spine,

neck and head will be the last things to uncurl as you come upward into a standing position.

- Continue to breathe as you stand, and notice how you feel now. Notice the sensations in your body. Notice if and how your experience is different.

This is a foundational grounding exercise from bioenergetics work. **By doing the forward bend with awareness, you can increase awareness of *being in your legs* and have a sense that your legs are doing their job of supporting you.** It's also a good exercise to begin noticing how you resist experiences by tightening your muscles and holding your breath.

This is an excellent exercise to help you settle and return to center if you're feeling overwhelmed or stressed out.

Presence, Contact, Energy - and Resisting Experience

Being fully present depends on your capacity to be grounded directly in your actual experience – in what is happening now.

Grounding consists of *contact*. Contact with the body, the earth, the psyche, and with your energy, your pleasures, your pains, your sexuality. It's about being in your senses, over and over. Being with what is really there. Being with your *actual* experience.

Being in contact means *in touch with*. So being in contact with your bodily experience means being in touch with what is actually there. Touch it. Not thinking about how the experience should be different. Thinking *about* the experience is being *out of contact* with the experience. Being in denial of pain, excitement, longing, sadness, anger – this is being out of contact with your experience. We cannot be fully present if we are out of contact with – resisting - what is actually happening with us.

Grounding supports our presence. One of the key benefits of grounding (and other body-mind work) work is to be able to tune into emotions *as sensations in our body*. Being able to be with emotions in this way helps us to process them – to “digest” them. Having worked with grounding, we can increasingly discover that as we're having strong feelings, we can turn our awareness *toward* those feelings and let them be there as sensations. We discover that strong feelings are workable, that we can have them and be OK.

I said that we can't be present - can't be in contact with ourselves - if we are resisting experience. **How do we know we are resisting our experience?** Two strong clues are, (1) we hold our breath, and (2) we tense our muscles.

In some body-mind psychotherapy traditions, **grounding also speaks to the sensation of the free movement of energy through your body** – from feet to head, and back again. Since emotions/feelings are experienced as movement/energy in our bodies, this is simply another way of saying that being grounded supports us in letting ourselves have *whatever* experience we are having. Energy cannot flow freely in us if we hold our breath, or if we tense our muscles. We hold our breath and tense our muscles to resist experience – and in this case, to resist feeling experiences.

The experience of stress is a function of experiencing arousal that exceeds our capacity to process or “digest.” One of the reasons we can’t address our stress is because we aren’t clearly aware of what we are experiencing and/or we aren’t clearly aware of the feelings we are having about our situation. This is often because, for a variety of reasons, we don’t want to have the feelings we’re having – and thus, we are resisting what is *actually* happening.

When we resist our experience (e.g., our anger, our tiredness, our fear, our excitement), we limit our ability to work with “negative” feelings or have our genuine excitements and pleasures. Being able to be with emotions as sensations in the body helps us learn to have and process those feelings. And to learn what needs to come next for our wellbeing.

When we are grounded, we are in contact with the body, with the ground under our feet, and we feel supported in ourselves. We experience stability in ourselves, in the world around us, and we claim our ground in a way that allows for others to have their ground too.

Grounding is both an activity and an experience – an ongoing action and a state of being. Being in relationship with our body, with the earth, is an ongoing creative activity, because our body, energy, the earth, and our relationship to these are moving and changing. We can also talk about grounding as a state of being; in this way “grounding” is a noun. That is, one experiences being *grounded*. In this state of being grounded, we feel settled, a sense of solid support that is able to negotiate the changing experiences of our relationship to the ground, to our feelings, our energy, and our connection with others.

Returning to the now of our physical/energetic body is a fundamental route to grounding, to developing an ongoing sense of resilience and support, and to learning to tend to our needs when we are under stress.

The next exercise – the bow – helps us learn to work in an intentional way with the relationship between having energy (being aroused, having charge) and being grounded.

Exercise: The Bow – Developing Bodily Charge and Grounding It

- Begin in a natural standing position with your feet about 18 inches apart.
- Turn your toes slightly inward.
- Make loose fists of your hands and place them knuckles upward in the small of your back.
- Let your knees bend, but not so much that your heels come off the ground.
- Imagine a string pulling your chest forward and a string pulling your pelvis forward so that your back now forms an arch. Your weight should be forward on the balls of your feet, but your feet should remain flat.
- Breathe deeply into your stomach, as low into your pelvis as you can.
- Let your body form a bow shape. If you're fighting it, you've gone too far. There should be some effort, but not so much that you're fighting hard. This position will raise energy/charge in your body.
- Let your awareness take in your body from head to toe. Feel your legs and feet supporting your and the weight of your body going through your legs into the ground.
- Notice if you are locking your neck, back, pelvis, or legs/knees.
- Find a position where your chest and pelvis come forward (not rigidly locked though), where your legs/knees are bent (not rigidly locked), and where you remember to breathe deeply into your belly/pelvis.
- If you notice a vibration in your body, that's natural. Let it be there.
- Notice if you resist your experience - either by tensing muscles unnecessarily, or by holding your breath.
- See if you can find a place in the pull of gravity where some energy is being generated in your body, but not so much that you shut down. Don't make this into a fight, and don't give up too soon.

- Be aware of any feelings that come up, and stay aware of them as sensations in your body.
- Breathe, notice where you tense or resist your experience, and see if you can settle and ground as you feel the energy in your body.
- When you are done (after a minute or two, or more), slowly and gently return to the basic standing position.
- Now gently go forward and do the Forward Bend grounding exercise.
- Remember to feel gravity, keep breathing, and let go of unnecessary holding.

- After a minute or so, roll up slowly/gently from the Forward Bend to a standing position
- Notice how you feel. Tune into the sensation you're experiencing. Let them be there.

The bow is a foundational bodily charging practice from bioenergetic work. **This is an excellent exercise to help you develop charge/energy when we feel low, flat, or too much in your head.** The bow gives us a lot of information into how we approach stress, and how we resist energy and the arousal associated with stress.

- If you're feeling flat, low energy, or too in your head – try the bow exercise.
- If you're feeling your energy is too high, frantic, or scattered – try the forward-bend grounding exercise.

When you do them together, do the bow first, then the forward-bend grounding exercise next. After a bow, it's always a good idea to do the forward-bend exercise!

Signs of Being Ungrounded - Stress, and the Role of Grounding in Healing

Many of us **come to grounding as a practice or exercise that can help us address some discomfort in our lives.** We intuit that what we need is to “get our feet on the ground” - so that we don’t feel so scattered, vague, overwhelmed, angry, sad, or anxious. Here are some of the experiences that bring people to the practice of grounding:

- Get overwhelmed easily and/or feel exhausted
- Sense they are going in too many directions at once
- Are stressed, anxious, worried, over even panicked
- Are agitated or have a sense that their mind is racing
- Can’t think clearly, or have difficulty concentrating/focusing
- Lose track of things, including themselves
- Feel spacy and/or out of touch
- Feel caught on a treadmill of activity but it feels empty
- Know they are just “going through the motions”
- Know they are irritable and/or angry and can’t do anything about it
- Things – and perhaps they themselves - don’t feel “real”
- Feel overwhelming sadness, grief or longing
- Find themselves feeling flat, empty, and can’t get moving

What causes all this? These issues, when ongoing, have their root in being out of touch with our actual ongoing actual experience. When we’re are out of touch with what is *really* going on for us, it’s difficult to *address* what is going on with us. We may become ungrounded due to:

- A history of trauma
- Unresolved family of origin difficulties
- Lack of good nutrition, sleep, exercise
- Dramatic life changes
- Loss, grief
- Chronic stressors at home, school, work
- Outer conflicts with others
- Inner conflicts (e.g., between personal wants and familial “shoulds”)

Even dramatic “positive” changes can leave us ungrounded, because we aren’t able to integrate and “digest” all of what is happening with us.

Stress (whether caused by negative or positive changes), dramatic life events, anxiety and worry - all lead to arousal in your body-mind. Arousal is accompanied by a surge in sympathetic nervous system activation and the release of stress hormones. We are “all geared up,” and often with no sense of what to do about it. When we’re stressed in this way, we often limit our breathing, tense our muscles (and so lose track of what is actually happening in our bodies) – all with the result that we are aroused but not sure what to do.

It’s also **quite possible to go into a “rebound” mode where we shut down** when our body-minds have experienced too much stress. We may know we are aroused “over there” in the body, but feel detached from it. These are different forms of disconnection.

And thus, we may feel trapped, irritable, and overwhelmed with racing thoughts (fight or flight), or turn off everything and go into a slump due to being overwhelmed (shutdown), or we feel increasingly distant from our experience (detachment). These mechanisms are trying to protect us – in different ways. In general, they happen because we are “in our heads” while our body continues to experience arousal/shutdown “over there.” We’re disconnected.

The solution is to begin to reconnect. To ground in the here-and-now of our actual sensed and felt experience.

Tuning into your body with awareness, while also breathing and letting yourself have your experience (feeling emotions as sensations), allows your body to distribute and process the arousal and re-find its equilibrium. We can begin to feel more centered, stable, and able to address what is happening.

Grounding can provide dramatic help when you are suffering from distress – from strong feelings, being overwhelmed, anxiety, PTSD, being shutdown, or feeling “out of it.” Naturally, grounding alone isn’t enough to “fix” trauma or relieve you of every symptom of distress you may have. However, grounding – getting back into contact with your body – is a key skill in learning to work with your distressed states.

Long-term chronic stress leads to long-term chronic tensions in the body – related to dealing self-protectively with long-term arousal. You may recall how the Bow exercise raised your energy, but also – perhaps – led you to fight the experience. If you’re dealing with chronic

stress, grounding exercises can help you find windows of stability and centeredness in your distress. If you face long-term stress, as can result from trauma, abuse or other circumstances, it's valuable to work with an experienced somatic therapist who can help you address those kinds of concerns.

- The basic Standing posture, where you feel the sensations of gravity and the sensations of breathing is a good posture to practice any time – even just for a few moments. It returns us to the here-and-now of our bodies and helps us check in with *what we are actually experiencing*. Resistance to experience doesn't make it go away. Letting experience (emotions, feelings, arousal) be there with awareness, begins to help us process the experience in constructive ways.
- The basic Forward Bend is a great grounding tool for the moment if you're feeling scattered or frantic. That is, if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed or if something happens to throw you off your center (e.g., an argument with someone, or you need to clear your head to make a decision).
- The Bow helps you begin to discover for yourself how you can build energy, how you may resist your experience, and how to find the right "balance" of being charged up with being grounded and rooted in your body, your senses, and your environment.

Remember, it's not just about moving into the basic Standing posture, Forward Bend, or Bow that does the work. **We must also bring our awareness fully to the experience – and notice the sensations of what is happening for us.**

While grounding skills won't solve everything, using the skills of grounding can help us get back to a more resourceful, centered place we can begin to make other choices that serve our wellbeing. Now more stable and centered, we can decide to: get more sleep; eat something that nourishes us; exercise; change our lifestyle to support self-care; to see a therapist; take a vacation; take up yoga; connect with friends ... and so forth.

Grounding returns us to the reality of our experience and taps into the natural healing resources of our body-mind so we can work effectively with our distress and build an ongoing sense of stability and resilience.

Grounding in brief – Return to your body with awareness, tune in to gravity, continue to breathe, and notice where you are resisting/tensing. Tune in to your experience, feelings, and emotions as sensations in your body. Continue to breath and stay with the sensations.

Grounding – Other Aspects of the Practice

We already know that body and mind are connected. Our language is filled with idioms that make it clear we know there is an intimate relationship between body, mind and soul. We talk, for example, about someone having their “feet on the ground.” Or whether or not someone has can or can’t “take a stance.” Then there’s “ground to stand on,” or “putting your foot down,” or “knowing where you stand,” and therefore knowing who you are.

Being grounded means being in contact with the basic realities of existence. It means being rooted in the earth, in your senses and body, tuned into what is really happening for you, and therefore aware of what you need and what you don’t.

We talk, too, about just “letting down” when we’re tired. Or how people “hold themselves up.” Sometimes people “hold up” (lift up, strain, fight gravity, resist experience) when it would be infinitely easier, more valuable - and make situations more workable - to “let down.” Since body and mind are not separate, this “holding up” has both mental-emotional and physical ways of showing up. This often reflects a lack of trust in the ground, a lack of trust in or belief that without efforting, there will be nothing or no one there to hold them. Physically we fight gravity unnecessarily, and both physically and psychically, we resist our experience.

A settled and naturally aligned standing body is naturally held up by its bone structure. When we are grounded, for example, in a standing position, we don’t fight gravity *unnecessarily*. Standing requires a certain amount of energy, but the key here is to let the body do what it is meant to do without creating *extra* tension. When our body is out of alignment, we have to expend unnecessary effort in standing.

Even in lying down, we may be surprised how we fight gravity with some parts of our body, something you may have discover quite readily if you bring awareness to how some of your muscles resist gravity *even when lying down!*

So, we grasp that grounding means *letting down*. It means getting out of our head (not leaving it behind of course!). Lower your center of gravity. Flex your knees. Notice how this increases a sense of stability and security. By lowering our center of gravity, we allow ourselves to include

all of our nature, including our bodily nature. Grounding brings us back to a sense of stability, security, sense of self, including self-regulation and self-respect.

Being grounded means we find the natural balance between containment and expression.

Grounding not only brings us into the present, the here and now, of our experience, but it helps us *have and be with* our life force – and to contain and express it as appropriate. When we're having strong feelings, or feel a strong sense of energy (e.g., from physical exercise, from a breathing practice, from a shocking experience), grounding in our physical body and feeling a strong connection to the earth helps us *hold* the energy, without having to immediately do something about it. Without this grounding, we may react and act out the energy in habitual ways that don't empower us (e.g., excessive talking, getting angry and blowing up, feeling overwhelmed and withdrawing, engaging in excessive activity, sexual activity, drinking, etc.).

Grounding in our physical body helps create a sense of stability, safety and security that enables and allows us to have strong feelings, strong emotions, and to let them flow as needed. In bioenergetic work, we talk about the importance of self-awareness, self-regulation and self-expression.

It's important to be able to contain *and* express energy. Doing so in empowering ways needs both awareness and grounding. We often chronically contract our body-minds and thus unconsciously overcontain and resist some feelings (e.g., anger) or experiences (e.g., asking for help). Alternatively, we may have trouble holding some feelings (e.g., anxiety), and have to express it in ways that don't really help us (e.g., excessive talking). These chronic patterns of containment or expression are not *choices*, they are old habits. Working with a professional can help us become aware of these patterns and support us in finding new ways to work with the energy underlying them.

When working with grounding on our own, we can bring awareness to our experiences - and grounding in the body and earth can help us *be with* emotions without running from or reacting from them. We feel the support of our bodies and the earth, we can *have* the feelings, and register that not only will we not break, but we are actually more enlivened by their energy. Solid presence and grounding can create the foundation for this experience.

Grounding supports us in having boundaries that are both flexible and firm. The sense of being grounded settles us in space so we can feel that we have can hold who and where we are *while also* being able to be with others, connect with them, and let them in *as we wish*.

Being grounded isn't *simply* being present in the body that we are, but it is indeed a gateway into the present and supports other processes that are part of solid grounding. Good full breathing, eye contact, and a range of vocal expression are also part of our individual and embodied grounding in the present.

More Grounding Practices

Grounding without practice is not grounding at all. In this chapter, we'll touch on some practices that can continue to give you *experience* in grounding. One practice well-explored is better than many practices touched half-heartedly. One practice experienced over time will give you an understanding far deeper than reading dozens of pages of exercises.

Grounding is to be present - fully - in one's body - in connection with the earth, in connection with one's environment, and feeling their support. As we've noted, grounding is more than just being fully in the body (e.g., we can be grounded in a relationship, in a community, in our sense of mission), but **the different forms of grounding are still experienced through our own sensations – in and through our bodies.**

Since we are often "up in our heads," (that is, not in our immediate bodily experience) we will continue to work with grounding through our physical bodies, and expand outward from there. We return to the foundation of our physical body so to speak.

This next exercise sequence helps us have the experience of being grounded as we move from lying down, to sitting, to standing up. As always, it's important to bring awareness of gravity, breathing, and sensation in our bodies - to help us be present.

Exercise Sequence: Moving Grounded from Lying, to Sitting, to Standing

“Always slower” is a good principle to follow in doing the following practices. These movements are not calisthenics. They are a way to bring body, mind and awareness together – to discover, in fact, that in awareness, body and mind are *experience* and inherently *not separate*.

Ground into your back - into and through the earth

- **Lie flat of the floor** - Let yourself feel the support of the floor while you breathe gently. Let the floor support you. How much can you really *give in* to that support? Notice where you tend to "hold up" or maintain tension that keeps you from letting go into the earth. Stretch your right leg to make it longer than your left. Relax. Stretch your left leg in similar fashion. Continue to alternate right and left for a minute or two.
- **Knees to chest** - Continue to lie on the floor. Bring both knees to your chest. Push your right leg out, then left leg out while bringing your left back to your chest as though you were bicycling. Continue slowly for a minute or two.
- **Knees to chest, rocking** - Continue to lie on the floor. With both knees drawn to your chest, rock back and forth to almost a sitting position. Play with this, trying different speeds, distance traveled, and so on.

These exercises help you ground into your back, to feel “backed up” or “held up.” As you move to grounding in an upright position, you bring with you this increased awareness of support from your body and the earth. Feeling this can make it easier to let down into your legs as you move up from the earth.

Moving up from the earth - still supported

- **Sitting, grab ankles** - From a sitting position, legs straight out in front, reach as far down your legs as you can and hold that position for a minute. Stay a bit longer if you like.
- **Squat, forward bend** - Squat with your feet flat on the floor. Slowly straighten your legs by *pushing into and through your heels* into the floor until you are in a standing position, with your torso hanging forward - letting your arms dangle as low as they naturally want to dangle. Stay there for a couple of minutes. You may be holding your breath, so *remember to breathe fully* into your belly.

- **Bear walk** - From this forward bend position, feet about shoulder-width apart, let your arms lower until your hands are flat on the floor (spread your legs as much as needed). Walk around the room in this position. Feel the stretch in your legs and back. Growl some, and then growl some more as you continue to walk. Feel the vibration of the growling in your torso and whole body.

Standing - still connected with and supported by the earth

- **Unfolding, roll up** - Move into a crouched position, push your feet into the floor (really feel yourself *pushing* through your feet, and especially your heels) and uncurl upwards, pushing your pelvis under your back for support as you move into a standing position. Unroll upward one vertebra at a time. Let your head come up last as you unroll into a standing and aligned position.
- **Aligned in the standing and relaxed position**- Standing with your feet shoulder-width apart, balance your weight over the center of the arches of your feet (feel where it feels best to you), and find where your center of balance is. Breathe slowly and deeply, breathing into your belly. Really breathe *fully* into your whole body. Imagine your bones balanced on top of each other, like dinner plates in a stack. You don't have to *hold* yourself up. Your bones – when aligned – hold you up naturally!

You've been in this position before; it is the basic Standing grounded position. Become aware of your energy moving through your body. Be aware of it as a sensation. You might experience a tingling, or a subtle vibration in in your muscles, or you may have the sensation of streaming/flow through your body. How do you *experience* this aligned and grounded position?

Standing - grounded - and feeling some more energy

- **Reach for the sky** - In a standing position, extend your right arm above your head, pushing the heel of your hand towards the ceiling and at the same time push your right heel into the floor, knee slightly bent. Breathe fully into your belly, including your lower belly. Hold this stretched position for up to a minute. Do the same on the left side. Repeat three times. If your limbs tremble, it's fine. Your body-mind is shaking out some chronic tension.
- **Shoulder shrug** - Lift your shoulders up to your ears while you make fists and squeeze. Hold your shoulders and fists contracted in that way for a few seconds - and then let them drop. *Ahh!* Do this a few times. Imagine contracting all your bones up, then let go ... as loose as you can let down. Remember to keep your legs and feet heavy and

lowered into the floor. This exercise helps you to gently increase your energetic "charge."

Both of these last two exercises gently increase your energy. Feeling grounded, you can feel the increased charge *while also having a sense that you can hold the energy* - and that the earth and your grounded body support you in experiencing this energy. As you do this exercise, let your boundary/sense of energy expand and just enjoy the increased charge. Return to the aligned position. What do you notice? How do you feel differently now? How can you carry this sense of yourself into your day?

This sequence builds on what you've learned so far. As always, *work slowly*, bringing your awareness fully to your felt bodily experience. Notice when you hold your breath (and continue to breathe), and notice where you tense *unnecessarily* (this is where you resist your experience).

As thoughts, feelings and experiences emerge, bring your awareness up close to the experiences as *sensations* and notice with curiosity how they change, spread, shrink, stay the same, or *whatever* happens with them.

If you do this sequence near bedtime, you might want to omit the final two exercises, which can be energizing.

Grounding, Embodiment, Subtle Energy, and Deeper Awareness Practice

It's common in our language to talk about body *and/or* mind, matter *and/or* spirit. A natural extension of this way of thinking is to imagine that to be more in tune with spirit, we need somehow to leave our bodies behind. Or that being fully *in* our bodies, that we are somehow *less* spiritual, or at least, less attuned to spirit.

Being in our physical body doesn't take us further away from spirit, or what is essential in us. The physical body *too* is spirit. Fully settling into our physical body can put us very much more in touch with the subtle energies that support and form us, with our emotions, with our intellectual resources, *and* with our essence, with spirit. This is, of course, not the same thing as saying we are *only* our bodies.

The body – being nonverbal and nonconceptual – has lived access to both pre-verbal experience and experiences that transcend the verbal. In this way, grounding is a resourceful place in which to become aware of and work resourcefully with early life experiences (e.g., joys and traumas), learnings (e.g., reaching out doesn't get support), and decisions (e.g., depending on the self alone is better than the pain of reaching out). Grounding too is a resourceful and centered place in which we can touch energies and experiences that are “larger” than our everyday sense of self (e.g., a deep sense of connection with the natural environment, the experience of all of the universe as being alive, registering that self and experience are not different).

Some traditions view the body and the material world as something to be gone beyond. Other traditions do not view the physical body in this way, and see the body as an important part of who we are – even if not all of who we are. Some spiritual meditative and psychospiritual practices, although not arising from a body-negative tradition, may be approached in ways that advertently reinforce a body-mind split. For example, mindfulness practices can at times serve to reinforce an intellectual style that is able to be mindful of thoughts and perhaps emotions, but still does not fully embrace the experience of the body. There is a subtle but important distinction between being aware *of* the body, and being aware *as* body (and awareness) that we are.

Don't *ride* the horse. *Be* the horse.

No matter how efficiently or sensitively we ride the horse, unless we know our body as a lived experience from the inside, we are still “riding it from above.” Fully embracing the oneness of our physical body can bring us into present awareness. And in this embodied present awareness, in being fully in our physical body, we can also be fully in *all* of our bodies - physical, emotional, mental, spiritual.

Our grounding is our connection to the universe. And being here and now fully embodied in our body is a way to return over and over the experience of grounding. It's not the *only* way of course, but as adults who spend a great deal of time in our minds, re-embodying our consciousness is a golden route to grounding... to our connection with the universe.

When we ground and become more aware in the present, in our bodies, we become increasingly sensitive to subtle ebbs, flows, pulses, and shifts of experience (sensation) in our bodies. Where does our “physical” body end and our “subtle” body begin? Maybe that question is unanswerable because they are both intimately intertwined. Where, after all, does matter begin and energy end? If we stay directly in touch with our *experience* (and don't impose an intellectual framework), we notice that in our *experience* of our feet touching the earth, there is not a separation between earth and feet. There is one *experience*. Just so, we might get lost in intellectual debate about the separation between physical and subtle energy bodies, but in staying close to our experience, we are aware, simply, of one *experience*.

Turning down the noise of our mind by settling into our grounded bodies does allow us to become more aware of and responsive to the potentials of these subtle sensation, these subtle “energies” that are not separate from the physical in our *experience*.

For many, the experience of being grounded also comes to include – at least at times - the experience of being rooted in something deeper than our individual selves, or in our immediate environment. One might say that we experience a sense of rootedness in the “ground of being.” This is where the practice of grounding provides a gateway into deeper awareness practices. Long-time practitioners of some kinds of mindfulness and other awareness practices develop (or suddenly find themselves in) a sense of stable, rooted presence that feels grounded *in whatever is happening, even as it is happening*.

Learning to practice grounding, through the body, directly in our *experience* is very much on the path to this deeper kind of grounded awareness in being, or awareness as such.

Developing a Personal Practice

Grounding practices can have both an immediate helpful effect (e.g., when we are aware in them moment of feeling angry or anxious), and can **also build an ongoing foundation of grounded presence and resilience** – when practiced and over time.

With this in mind, I want to encourage you to consider practicing grounding a little bit, often. Doing the basic Standing position, Bow, and Bend-Over positions can be done in less than five minutes. Just doing the Bend-Over for a minute or two during the day can make a big difference in the long-run. When we practice in this way, **our body-minds remember that grounding is possible**, and a resource for us. Then, in the moment when we really need it, it become easier to remember to ground for a minute or two.

Remember, “always slower” is a good principle. In this way, we don’t do these practices as calisthenics, but rather as a way of **experiencing and re-integrating body, feeling, and mind in awareness**.

Practicing longer sequences, or holding some of the basic grounding positions for longer, very much builds into our body-minds the ongoing experience of being present, grounded and resourceful. As this happens, we can begin to notice that when momentary stresses arise, we more quickly and even reflexively begin to settle into body, presence and awareness.

Grounding is “simple.” We just need to do it. Instead of running from our stress - and from our experience - we can instead return to our body with awareness, tune into gravity, and tune into our sensations. We can breathe and notice where we resist our experience through tensing or through holding our breath. We can be with what is happening in our experience.

By letting our experience, as it is now, be in our awareness, we ground in something deeper and deeper because we have space for more and more of who we are. However, there is wisdom and power in starting with the body. Over time, we may discover there is more to the body, and experience, than we ever imagined. And so, return to experience, and especially, return to the sensation of our body. Ground there, first.

To be grounded is to feel your contact with the earth, to feel supported *by* the ground and your body - and through this, to feel support for your *self*. With this sense of being backed up, of being held up, with a sense of stability in the world, we can claim the ground we stand upon when we are faced with a challenge in our life. We can feel the sensation and energy, and with awareness, we can choose how and when to contain it and/or to express it.

From this grounded position, we allow room to connect with and be with others in ways **that honor *our space* and that let others be there and have their space as well.** From this grounded and energized place, we can be responsive to what is happening - neither ignoring our energy nor impulsively expressing it - **while remembering who we are.**

Resources

- *Bioenergetics: The Revolutionary Therapy that Uses the Language of the Body to Heal the Mind* – Alexander Lowen
- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* - Bessel Van Der Kolk
- *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* - Peter A. Levine
- *Joy: The Surrender to the Body and to Life* – Alexander Lowen
- *The Way to Vibrant Health: A Manual of Bioenergetic Exercises* – Alexander Lowen & Leslie Lowen

To follow up on the topics in this resource, to learn more, or to schedule an appointment, contact Dr. Charles Martin.

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