

# Sacred Body

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Your body does not exist. What appears to be flesh and bones is not physical matter at all. It is a collection of atoms swirling around in empty space. Vedanta says that everything is unreal, it is all illusion. Buddhism says that all life is suffering. This might be a valid description of your life, if you obsess on the illusion as though it were Reality. But yoga says something completely different. Yoga says that all life is sacred, including your body.

To understand the sacredness of your body, you need only consider of what it is made. Your physical body is made of atoms. The atoms are not themselves solid matter, but are made of subatomic particles. The subatomic particles are also not really particles. They are all tiny bits of contracted energy moving at preposterous speeds in a vast amount of empty space. The energy that makes up your body is the same as the energy that manifests as the plants, the ocean, the moon and the stars. This energy swirls in differing patterns, which determine what the physical object will be. This energy dances in these intricate patterns on a background of unmoving empty space the physicists now tell us is not really empty. It is full of something, but they do not know what the "something" is.

Where did the energy come from? The physicists cannot yet answer this. They begin to sound like the poets and mystics when they speculate on the answer. It does not matter if they ever give us an answer, because the question is itself important. Consider it for yourself. When you begin to consider your body as consisting of energy dancing in complex patterns in space, your experience of your body and your experience of who you are changes. You begin to know the meaning of the word, "sacred." The knowing of this cannot be described in words. Your body is a sacred place.

For ten years I traveled all over the world, spending extended periods of time in many different countries and cultures. In retrospect I realize that what I had been doing was visiting sacred places. I lit candles in medieval cathedrals, bowed my head in Hindu temples, lit incense in Chinese and Japanese temples, sat in Buddhist monasteries, and stood in the back of Islamic mosques. In Granada, Spain, I visited synagogues that had been desecrated by the government when they expelled the Jews in the 1400's. The buildings were then converted to churches and are now standing empty. Standing inside I could tell that they are still sacred.

I climbed mountains and watched oceans, rivers and waterfalls. I attended fire ceremonies and sweat lodges. Mosques were the hardest for me to comprehend. It was in Malaysia that I experienced, finally, the sacredness of Islam. Then, somehow the pilgrimages were complete. I knew, in a way that words cannot describe, that every religion is valid and that every place is sacred. The spot where you now stand is sacred ground. There is not anywhere that isn't sacred. Na shivam vidyate kvachit – there is nowhere that God is not. In a movie, John Denver stood dripping wet in a newspaper office after God (played by George Burns) had made it rain inside the car. "But you do not understand!" he shouted to the reporter. "This is holy water! God made it!" The newspaperman was not impressed. Where is there water that God did not make?

Many years ago a New York City rabbi was great friends with an Indian Guru. The rabbi would visit for long philosophical discussions with the Indian holy man. After many months of weekly visits, the rabbi brought up a topic that had been bothering him for some time. "You have many beautiful statues in your garden, Swami. But your statue of Moses is against the rules of my religion, as God forbids the making of images." The Swami replied with a question, "Does your God exist in the heavens?" "Yes," said the rabbi. "Does your God exist in the stars?" "Yes, he does." "Does your God exist in the earth and the water and the streams?" "Oh, yes," said the rabbi. "Does your God exist in the plants and flowers?" "Yes, my God exists everywhere," said the rabbi. "Then what makes you think He does not exist inside the statue, too?" The rabbi paused. He finally replied, "I will have to think about that."

What makes you think God does not exist inside yourself. Does that presence stop at the outside of your skin? Take a breath. Pause. Consider again: Of what substance are you made? A Sufi saint once said that you can tear down a church, you can break apart a synagogue or temple, you can burn down a mosque, but you must never break a human heart, for that is where God resides.

The spot where you now stand is sacred ground. And you, the one standing on it, are also sacred ground. It is what you do with the ground that makes it a holy place or not. With an empty field you can build a temple, a park, a hospital, a nightclub or a cemetery. Regardless of what you build, the ground itself does not change. The difference is only a decision. The same is true with your body. Your body is like the vacant field. You can do with it whatever you decide.

Your body usually lags two or more years behind your mind. In other words if you quit smoking, your body will be healing the effects of your previous habit for two years or longer. If you change your eating habits, your body will take some time to go through a process of becoming healthier. Still, it is really about your mind, because first there must be a decision to make the changes.

Even more powerfully, yoga says you digest your thoughts. You can eat all the “right” foods, but if you continue a steady diet of negative or fearful thoughts, you will be sick. You must begin to see the sacred in everyone and in everything. This is what it truly means to change your thoughts. When someone cuts you off on the freeway, offer them that piece of the road with generosity. I learned this from a driver on the freeway. He had been changing lanes furiously and was tailgating me so I blocked him. When he finally got by me, he rolled down his window and shouted “My dog was hit by a car, and I am trying to get him to the vet.” Give that spot on the road to the frantic driver, thinking that maybe he or she needs it more than you do. Or maybe they only think they need it, so give them your compassion, too.

You need some retraining. Your training in life has been programming in negativity, fear, need and greed. This has created your need for relentless activity. This perpetual activity masks the underlying insecurities that come from your not knowing the sacred in yourself. You may need help with your retraining. Take trainings, workshops or study with someone who currently knows more about it than you do.

In the meantime, keep an eye out for the sacred. It can be found in so many moments of your day. Use the red traffic signals as a reminder to slow down. Take a breath and look around. Maybe you will see a flower, or notice the color of the sky. When you’re stuck in line at the sandwich counter or photocopier, take it as a reminder from God to see this place as a sacred place. Look at everyone there as being energy. Find the sacred even in a person you don’t like. Find the sacred in yourself.

The spot where you now stand is sacred ground. You, standing on it, and your body, with which you stand, are also sacred. *Na shivam vidyate kvachit* — there is nowhere that God is not. There is nothing that is not divine. You are a manifestation of God. See what it is like to live in a world where everything is sacred and God is not far away. Look inside yourself, or look into the light shining through the eyes of another person, and you will see that God is close to you. The divine is never far away. Then see what kind of decisions you make. How will you decide to use your mind — to profane the sacred or to honor it and make it shine? What kind of life do you want to live? It is only a decision away. The spot where you now stand is sacred ground.

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