

Embracing Materialism and Letting *It* Go

*An experiential guide to overcoming an object-based
world conception*

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Chapter 1

Touching the Earth



It had been years, even lifetimes, of searching that had led to this particular moment. A simple instant of time and suddenly every impression of the world was different, and he was different or, perhaps, nothing was different. The language of the past was insufficient to communicate the experiences that were now arising. The traditional view of a fixed outer world and a separate interior one no longer made sense. He could see how these views had

arisen, how they had been useful for a time in his life. However, there was now absolute clarity that both possibilities – the view of a completely independent self and a separate world – were as incorrect as the view that all phenomena were illusory. Both views were simply untrue when direct human experiences were examined carefully. In that moment of awakening, all experience came to be seen anew and to demonstrate this new understanding. He called upon the earth itself to witness this event. He reached out and touched the earth. In that moment he and the earth were experienced as the true reality of one inseparable experience.

The moment of enlightenment of the Buddha is an event that most people have heard of, but fewer are aware of the details of that moment. In the west, many people who are familiar with this story are so because they have read Hermann Hesse's, *Siddhartha*, a fictional story based on the life of the Buddha. Tich Naht Hanh, the popular Vietnamese Buddhist monk, known for his practices of mindfulness, authored the well-known account *Old Path White Clouds*. In this book he describes in great detail the traditional story of the Buddha's life, including the moment of the Buddha's enlightenment. It is also portrayed in the movie classic, *The Little Buddha*.

Each of these stories describes what happens, but few elaborate on the particular moment of awakening: the moment the Buddha touches the earth. I had never given this small and seemingly trivial detail much notice until many years after I first read the account. By that time, I had become familiar with a few different lenses with which to investigate the relationship between inner and outer experience. Wrestling with the initial paradox of inner and outer, and subsequently finding a synthesis through a unity of experience, proved to be of utmost value in this investigation.

In the summer of 2000 I was asked to attend a small conference on Buddhism and Anthroposophy. It was requested-by one of the organizers, Gregor Simon-McDonald, that I present something of my own experience of these two spiritual streams and, as I was also scientifically trained, I was asked to add a bit of science as well. I was a bit overwhelmed by the request, but agreed to try and find a small contribution that I could make. Gregor knew that I had been struggling for over a decade to integrate a world understanding from both a Buddhist worldview and that of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. My study of these two philosophies began in the summer of 1989 when I attended a one week retreat on Tibetan Buddhism. I was employed as a mechanical engineer at that time and had always been interested in both the spiritual and scientific paths of knowing the world. In hindsight, I find it interesting that during the week of that first Buddhist retreat I also met the person that would later introduce me to Rudolf Steiner's ideas on Waldorf Education. This eventually led me to Steiner's philosophical and spiritual work. So, in essence, I had found Buddhism and

Anthroposophy, or more likely, they had found me, in the same week.

As I prepared for my short presentation I recalled a medium--sized bronze image of the Buddha I had purchased a number of years earlier. In recalling the mudra or hand position of the Buddha, I recalled that the gentleman who had sold me the image had fully encouraged me to take this particular one. It was he, Charles O'Hara who had first informed me that the gesture "Touching the Earth", was the gesture of the Buddha at the moment of enlightenment. "It is a very important mudra" he stated again, and although I had my eye on another image or two, in the end I purchased the one he had encouraged me to get.

All of this was circling in my thinking as I prepared my presentation for the conference. As the gesture of the Buddha, touching the earth, came back to my imagination once more, I recalled that touch is one of the first senses that a child experiences when newly born. In an instant, the following exercise appeared. The reader is encouraged to take part in the exercise that follows and to practice before continuing further. This book is intended not simply as a declaration of the author's view but, rather, as a means of encouraging the reader (and the author) to continue to investigate his or her individual relationship to the world. The question of subjective or objective knowing will be left for the moment, to be returned to later in the book.

Exercise #1

I will assume that you are sitting while reading this book. If you are not sitting in a straight--backed chair or a bench, please move to one of these seating surfaces before continuing further. Also, be sure that there is some type of table in front of you. Next, read all of the directions in the following paragraph carefully before beginning the exercise. Part of the exercise will involve closing your eyes, so unless you read all of the instructions in this section first (or peek at the directions while performing the exercise), you will never be able to complete it!

Sit in the chair previously mentioned with a table about one foot in front of your body. Be sure to sit up straight so that all of your weight is on your seat, do not lean back onto the back of the seat nor lean on the table in front of you. You want to be as still as you can with no movements and as little direct contact on your body. Sit comfortably – upright and erect, but not stiffly. Next, you will close your eyes and then extend your arm out in front of you so that it is approximately horizontal (remember, your eyes are closed so if it feels about horizontal that is fine). Keeping your arm horizontal, place your hand and fingers pointing down toward the table. (Most people have found it best to point with the pointer

finger while curling the others up loosely as if you were pointing to something on the floor below the table). Again, be sure to do all of this with your eyes closed. Now, you will take a moment to note what you feel and then slowly lower your arm toward the table until “something happens” and you can’t lower your hand anymore. Keep your eyes closed and repeat the exercise a few times. Try slightly different starting heights for your arm. After you have completed the exercise take a couple of minutes to note any and all experiences you had or observations that were made. Once you have completed the exercise, you can turn to the commentary on the next page.

Now close your eyes and perform the exercise.

Commentary on Exercise #1

The following list of experiences is by no means exhaustive. While most of these are commonly experienced and help to illustrate some of the key points in this chapter, different people have different experiences, often due to the variety of life experience that each human being has had prior to performing this, or any other, activity.

Upon first closing their eyes, many people develop an awareness that without seeing their hand or experiencing a sensation of touch, they lose track of where their hand is. Additionally, when the arm is being lowered, many people describe how the first sensation (what we refer to as “touching the table”) seems to occur at a lower elevation than they had anticipated. Some people describe this experience of not yet “touching the table” as unsettling and are relieved when a sense of touch arises as a result of contact with the table.

Two other experiences are worth noting. First, many people describe sensing the table just before coming in physical contact with the table. It seems to vary from person to person, but often it is described as either warm or slightly “energetic,” such as when a person has their hand very close to yours but they aren’t quite touching. Finally, many people describe a sense of their own body when contact occurs with the table. This last point deserves a much more thorough investigation. Note that the “relief” of finding one’s own body by touching the table with closed eyes is related to this last point as well.

So which of the following statements is true? Do we touch the table and then experience our self? Or are we simply experiencing our self and thereby noting when we are touching the table? How many touches are there anyway? Is there one for the table and one for our own body? At this point the reader is encouraged to repeat the exercise again and really pay attention to how many touches are occurring. Do we have a separate sensation of finger and another of

table at the moment of touching?

In fact there is only “one touch.” That’s right, there is only one touch. It is the same sensational experience that we are having that causes us to say both “my hand” and “table.” It is we who separate this single tangible experience into inner and outer components through the use of our other senses. Usually this involves the sense of vision, touch and movement, as well as how we choose to think about the experience. We only have one sensation with our eyes closed, and that is all we experience, unless we investigate further using other senses and our conceptualization ability. Sure, we could resort to motion and start moving our hand across the surface to experience texture (the integration of touch, motion, and a subtle sense of inner balance in our self). We could also open our eyes and note there is an image of “table” and “my hand.” Note how no one sense by itself is sufficient to make a definitive statement about what “is.” We constantly strive to validate our concept of “what has happened” by looking for another sense whereby we corroborate the initial concept or statement. In this particular case the concept we arrive at is: table!

* * *

The integration of vision and touch will be further taken up later in the book. For now, let us consider that perhaps all of our senses work in the following manner. Each sensory impression has one sensory component, and it is we who separate them into an inner and outer component by integrating multiple sensory impressions and forming concepts about their possible relationships. This peculiar experience may seem like a trick, but I would suggest that the implications are tremendously important. It is not just the philosophers, neuroscientists and artists that have such a strong interest in our sense perception; we all are capable of taking real interest in “making sense of our world.”

In the 1960’s, the U.S. Navy performed a number of experiments with sensory deprivation tanks. While many people may have experienced a simpler more calming version of the experiment, often with nice music and pleasant scents, the original version was very intense. In this experiment, a person was placed into a darkened tank of salt water at body temperature. If hearing was also suppressed, no sensory impression was experienced by the person, provided they didn’t move their body vigorously, touch the side of the tank, or drink the water! It is dark – no vision; the water is body temperature – no sense of warmth; the water is salt water and is very buoyant so there is no sense of weight. Most of the participants reported that they lost all sense of their own body, all sense of time, and it was commonly described as a very disturbing and disorienting experience. A number of people stated that their limbs felt as if they extended to great lengths. Most importantly, many of the participants described losing a sense of their own self. Without any world to interact with there was -also no

sense of self.

Sense impressions appear to be the gateway to our ability to conceptualize an inner and outer world. Take away all sense impression and our ability to stay connected to a concept of world or of self quickly deteriorates. In fact, a number of medical and educational methodologies recognize the central importance of sensory impressions in helping to form the experience of the self. When premature babies are born, the parents are encouraged to hold the baby as much as possible as research has shown that babies that experience being held by another human being have a much higher survival rate than those babies that are left alone. A number of other studies have shown that young babies that are never touched fail to thrive and often end up dieing or developing learning or social difficulties.

Isn't it interesting that the senses that we use to form a "picture" of the outer world are also used to help us form a picture of our own self? More specifically, our sense of touch is actually a singular experience. It is we who separate this singular experience into what we conceptualize as an inner and outer component. It is we who make the separation! Observe a very young child and you can observe the child slowly learning to conceptualize the world in this way. Our sense of touch may make us more self aware than any of the other senses, yet the sense of touch is also the sense used to judge ultimately what is "really out there" and what is simply an illusion.

With the conclusion of the first exercise we find that the "world" and "self" are not simply given as separate entities. Through sense impression, an awakening occurs that results in a conceptualization of "self" and we immediately meet this polarity of experience with a concept of not-the-self, or "world."

The Buddha – touching the earth – one sense – it is we who make the separation. And in time, we can choose to close the separation. Not by going back, but by going forward. The self-awareness that arises with the sense of touch is useful, as long as we don't conceptualize it as the only way "things are."

Further Reading

Edelglass et al, *The Marriage of Sense and Thought*

Maier, Brady and Edelglass, *Being on Earth*

Ackerman Diane, *A Natural History of the Senses*

Steiner Rudolf, *The Philosophy of Freedom* (Also translated as *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*).

Hesse Herman, *Siddhartha*

Nhat Hahn Tich, *Old Path White Clouds*