Many years ago, while engaged in research for my book *Buddhist Saints in India*, I ran across a phrase—“touching enlightenment with the body”—that instantly captured my imagination and subsequently became a prolonged contemplation extending over at least two decades. Later, unsuccessfully, I tried to determine where I had first seen these words: Was it in a Pali text? Was it in a translation or commentary from the Theravadin tradition? Did I find it in a Mahayana or Vajrayana meditation manual? Or, perhaps, did I simply dream it or make it up?

Be that as it may, “touching enlightenment with the body” has defined my meditative life for a long time. What I still find so compelling is its suggestion that we are not to see enlightenment, but to *touch* it, and, further, that we touch it not with our thought or our mind, but with our *body*. It is interesting that this phrase of mysterious origin has many analogues within the
Theravadin tradition itself: enlightenment, for humans, is frequently presented as a somatic experience. Dogen, the founder of Zen, sometimes spoke of the body as the gateway to ultimate realization, and the Dzogchen teachings of Tibet affirm that enlightenment is found in the body.

What can such affirmations possibly mean? In what way can the body be thought to play such a central and fundamental role in the life of meditation? This question becomes all the more interesting and compelling in our contemporary context, when so many people are acutely feeling their own personal disembodiment and finding themselves strongly drawn to somatic practices and therapies of all kinds.

I bring to this question my own practice and teaching of meditation over the past four decades. During this period, many things have surprised me, but none more than the growing and somewhat anguished realization that simply practicing meditation doesn’t necessarily yield results. Many of us, when we first encountered Buddhism, found its invitation to freedom and realization through meditation extraordinarily compelling. We jumped in with a lot of enthusiasm, rearranged life priorities around our meditation, and put much time and energy into the practice.

Engaging meditation in such a focused way, some do discover the kind of continually unfolding transformation they are looking for. But more often than not, or at least in my own experience, that doesn’t happen. It is true that when we practice meditation on a daily basis, we often find a definite sense of relief and peace. Over a period of year or two, we may feel that things are moving in a
positive direction in terms of reducing our internal agitation and stress, and developing openness. All of this has value.

But if we have been practicing for twenty or thirty years, it is not uncommon to find ourselves arriving in a quite different and far more troubling place. We may feel that somewhere along the line, we have lost track of what we are doing and things have somehow gotten bogged down. We may find that the same old habitual patterns continue to grip us. The same kinds of disquieting emotions arise, the same interpersonal blockages and basic life confusion, the same unfulfilled and agonizing spiritual longing that led us to meditation in the first place. Was our original inspiration defective? Is there something wrong with the practices or the traditions we have been following? Is there something wrong with us? Have we misapplied the instructions, or is it perhaps that we are just not up to them?

My own sense is that there is a very real problem, though one that is not found in any of these questions and doubts, but rather in an entirely different direction. My experience suggests that our problem is very simple: we are attempting to practice meditation and to follow a spiritual path in a disembodied state, and this is inevitably doomed to failure. To put it simply, the full benefits and fruition of meditation cannot be experienced or enjoyed when we are not grounded in our bodies. The phrase “touching enlightenment with the body,” then, when understood fully, doesn’t just imply that we are able to touch enlightenment with our bodies; beyond that, it suggests that—except in and through our bodies—there actually is no other way to do so.