

Four Stages of Groundedness

by John J. Prendergast

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The Four-Stage Continuum of Groundedness

The ground is both a metaphor and a felt sense. As a metaphor, it means to be in touch with reality. As a felt sense, it refers to feeling our center of gravity low in the belly and experiencing a deep silence, stability, and connection with the whole of life. Feeling grounded does not require contact with the earth; it can happen anywhere and anytime — even when we're flat on our backs in a rowboat.

Reality is inherently grounding. The more in touch with it we are, the more grounded we feel. This is as true of the facts of daily life as it is of our true nature. Life is multidimensional, ranging from the physical to the subtle to formless awareness. When we are in touch with physical reality, we feel physically grounded. As subtle levels of feeling and energy unfold, we feel subtly grounded. When we know ourselves as open awareness, not separate from anything, we rest in and as our deepest ground that is sometimes called our homeground or groundless ground.

As attention deepens and opens, our experience of and identification with the physical body changes. Our felt sense of the ground shifts accordingly. After decades of working with clients and students, I have observed a continuum of groundedness that spans four broad experiential stages: no ground, foreground, background, homeground. Each has a corresponding body identity. Charts are inadequate when trying to describe such subtle and fluid experience, but because the mind likes to detect patterns and share them, the following chart may help you to picture this continuum.

No Ground

With the stage of no ground, it feels like we are barely in our bodies. We feel ungrounded. Our attention is on the surface or at a short distance from our body in a dissociative state. If we normally dwell in this stage as an adult, it is almost always because of childhood abuse or neglect. When we were being abused, it simply felt too dangerous to be present in the body. With neglect, it felt as if we weren't worth being attended to. Reworking this conditioning usually takes time. A safe, steady, and warmly attuned relationship allows attention to gradually reenter the body. Specialized somatic approaches also help.

We can experience temporary states of no ground when we are very ill or have been

traumatized by an accident or an abrupt loss. Most of us have had tastes of this disembodied, ungrounded state. As an odd coincidence, as I was writing the previous sentence, my son came into my room to inform me that my car was missing. Sure enough, when I went outside, it was nowhere to be found. I briefly felt very ungrounded and disoriented. It turns out I had left the car parked at work two days before, and having immersed myself in writing at home, I had completely forgotten about it! Some people experience this ungrounded feeling through their whole lives.

Foreground

The foreground stage unfolds as we get more in touch with our needs and feelings. The interior of the body opens as we learn to feel our feelings and sense our sensations. Attention drops down from the head and into the trunk and core of the body. We can feel more of what is happening in the heart area and the gut. This is a big discovery for people who have been trained to overly rely on their thinking — something our information-saturated society increasingly cultivates. Most psychotherapy and somatic approaches focus on this domain, helping people to be more in touch with themselves on a personal level and more open to relating with others.

When we experience the foreground deeply, we feel very much in the body. As subtle dimensions awaken, essential qualities such as love, wisdom, inner strength, and joy emerge. The body begins to feel less dense and more like energy — porous and light.

Here is a description by John Greiner, one of my interviewees, that fits this stage of being richly foregrounded in his body:

“When I am in touch with the truth, there’s a sense of calmness and being well-grounded. When I say calmness, it’s throughout my whole body. It’s a sense of being connected to the earth, almost as if there are roots. When I’m really grounded, it feels like it goes all the way to the center of the earth. It doesn’t matter if I’m walking or I’m sitting, but that is a big part of my foundation.”

Many spiritual approaches try to cultivate these subtle qualities and experiences so that they become stronger or last longer. While these practices can enhance the quality of personal life, they can also fuel an endless self-improvement project and delay the discovery of true inner freedom. Most psychospiritual approaches stop at this stage, satisfied with an enriched experience of the foreground.

Background

The background stage of awareness generally remains unrecognized, quietly out of view. It is like the page upon which words are written or the screen upon which a movie plays. It is the context within which the contents of awareness — thoughts, feelings, and sensations — arise. It is easily overlooked even though it is implicit in any experience. We cannot experience anything without awareness, yet when we try to objectify awareness, we can’t. Looking for and trying to define it is like the eye trying to turn upon itself; what is seeing cannot be seen. As a result, the mind dismisses it.

Attention is like a wave on the ocean of awareness. Sometimes it peaks, focusing upon a particular experience, and other times it subsides back into its source. At some point, either because we have an intuition of this source or because we are seasick from the waves (suffering from our attachments and identifications), we become interested in

following attention back toward its origin. This exploration may take the form of an intense, heartfelt inquiry — “What is this that is aware? Who am I really?” — or a simple, meditative resting in silence. It is more of an orientation than a technique.

As attention comes to rest quietly in the heart, not knowing, the background eventually comes into conscious awareness. At some point, we recognize that this is who we really are — infinite, open, empty, awake awareness. This recognition brings great freedom as we see that we are not bounded by space or time. We are not at all who we thought we were. No story or image can define or confine us. When we recognize our true nature as this unbounded awareness, we experience our body as being inside us, much like a cloud within the clear sky. Some spiritual traditions stop here, content with this transcendent realization.

When I was a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies a few years ago, one of my students, Dan Scharlack, who had been a Buddhist meditator for years, approached me and asked if I would be there for him, as he was going through an intense spiritual opening. Without thinking I agreed, although we had only recently met and I did not know what “being there” would entail. It turned out that my offer of support was all that he needed. He came back a week or two later and reported having had the following dramatic experience:

“I just wanted to let go into the emptiness, no matter what happened. It was strange, but as soon as the decision arose, there was also spontaneously a sense that I actually knew how to move into and through it. Nevertheless I felt like I wanted someone there with me when I did it in case something bad happened. . .

As I came to the same impasse, I felt my torso begin to shake. My heart was beating so fast that it felt like it would come out of my chest. My whole body moved in violent convulsions that almost sent me off the [meditation] cushion. I jerked forward, then back, and everything inside of me felt like it was screaming. My body was convulsing as it never had before. In spite of all of this, there was a sense that I just had to stay with the emptiness no matter what. There was a feeling of deep surrender, and I knew in that moment that I was willing to die for this.

And then it just kind of popped. I felt awareness move up my spine, out of the back of my heart, and out through the top of my head. While the shaking continued, it was less violent, and it was as if I was watching it from above and behind my body. Everything was incredibly quiet, and I had the unmistakable sense of looking down on my body from above with a deep feeling of compassion and sweetness for the one who was shaking. When I finally opened my eyes, it was as if I was looking at the world for the first time. Everything felt crisp, alive, and fascinating.”

Dan’s experience illustrates a marked shift of attention and identity from the foreground to the background stage of awareness. It was an initial awakening to his true nature.

Homeground

A final stage of discovery awaits — the realization of our homeground. Even when we know ourselves as the background, a subtle duality continues between background and foreground, the knower and the known. The true nature of the body and, by extension, the world remains to be fully discovered. The felt sense of infinite awareness begins to saturate the body, often from the top down, as it penetrates into the core and transforms

our emotional and instinctual levels of experience. It almost always takes years for this awareness to deeply unfold. As this happens, the body and the world feel increasingly transparent. We realize that the world is our body. The distinction between the background and the foreground, knower and known, dissolves. There is only knowing. Everything is seen and felt as an expression of awareness. There is a deep sense of being at home, as no-thing and everything. We could also speak of this as a groundless ground, a ground that is nowhere and everywhere. Words fail to capture it fully.

In 2010, I visited the Pech Merle cave in France, one of the few caves with extensive prehistoric paintings that remain open to the public. Since an earlier visit to Lascaux, I have been fascinated by these elegant charcoal and pigment drawings of horses, bison, aurochs (Paleolithic cattle), and mammoths, along with an occasional human handprint, some of which date as far back as 33,000 BCE. I have been equally drawn to the dark, silent caves that shelter these exquisite works of art.

Early one morning my wife, Christiane, and I joined a small group moving down a flight of stairs from a well-lit gift shop to the entrance of the cave about one hundred feet below. We stepped through the doorway into a completely different world — dark, cool, and unimaginably silent.

After a brief orientation, our guide warned us to stay together and began to lead us along a dimly lit path through the winding underground caverns. Despite her admonition, I felt compelled to hold back. As her voice and the footsteps of the others became increasingly faint in the darkness, I savored the extraordinary silence. The dark space beneath the earth and the feeling of open ground deep within my body became one ground — vibrant, dark, and mysterious. The outer and inner ground were not different; there was no separate knower and something known. I felt completely at home and at peace in the silence. There was a clear sense of knowing this homeground. Reluctantly, I rejoined the group after a few minutes.

Join this Saturday's Awakin Call with John Prendergast: 'Archaeologist of the Heart,' details and RSVP info here.