

You and Your Body are Not Enemies

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Dependent upon this body, most of us function without concern for its delicate balance. Then one day, something about our body becomes ‘not right’. We overuse a muscle group. We sprain a shoulder. We tear an Anterior Cruciate Ligament. We realize we have put on over 30 pounds. Our body becomes the other, the creature from the swampy dark sea, out to make us miserable. It, the body, is not doing It’s job. It is no longer something we can take for granted. We react with anger, betrayal, despair, and defense. Suddenly, something has to be done about It. We go to doctors, chiropractors, and physical therapists. We want to be treated, have someone else get rid of the ‘other’ that is making our lives miserable. We take medications and have surgeries. We want It to return to as It was before! It is not cooperating.

At this point, we actually have a great opportunity. We could learn to attend to It. Ha ha ha – such a radical idea! The body will never return to how it was before, just as you cannot return to when you were sixteen, or before the divorce, or when you had a lot of enthusiasm for your work. Time passes. Everything changes. This is the way of things.

Okay, so perhaps that is the way of things, changes happen, perhaps.... So, what is the big deal about awareness? There are two choices. You could do what needs to be done for the body, struggle with the goal to return to your previous ways, and practice habitual ignorance. You could do what needs to be done for the body, decide to practice awareness of the body and see where that way of life leads.

Choice number One: Continue to Ignore

We love this choice. Give me Ibuprophen, ice, a nice cool drink and reality television and I am good. Is that actually true? What is the quality of your experience before, during and after the television, chocolate, coffee, and alcohol, shopping binges? At best we are momentarily satisfied, or perhaps it lasts for a few hours. But then suddenly, It betrays us! Our knee hurts again, our hip on the opposite side gives out and the pain returns. “My body, that I am working hard to ignore, has come back to make me miserable.” So we begin again, looking for a different practitioner who will treat us, a different stimulus. What are the effects and results of this choice? Does it involve learning?

Perhaps there is nothing wrong with ignoring. I suppose it could be a choice, such as “I am going to ignore the pain in my knee, so that I can get through my daughter’s wedding without attracting attention to myself.” In my experience, the problem is: Ignoring is contagious. Easily it spreads to all parts of the body and becomes the mode of operation we use for all situations that are difficult for us or not. Ignoring becomes a numbing habit, a deadening choice that seductively tells us “you deserve this.” By engaging ignoring, we become a shadow of our own potential. I have seen the effects of habitual ignoring in myself and in my clients.

1. We become disconnected from experience. Even experiences that we enjoy lose their sparkling vitality. This disconnection becomes a blanket that overlays all interactions with life, including being with the people we like.

2. Our senses become numb. Seeing starts to lack distinction of light and color. Hearing becomes selective and generalized within a limited range. Proprioception (balance & touch) becomes gross and our ability to subtly feel change diminishes. Our sense of taste starts to solidify around one to three main tastes, within a bland environment. Thinking becomes limited, nothing can get in, nothing can expand and nothing can move.

3. We find ourselves saying things like “I am just trying to get by. This is survival here. I just want to have fun for a while.”

Choice number two: Learning to listen with attention to your body

So, your body hurts and you are pissed off, isn’t that awareness? Nope. That is reacting to pain. Awareness is the ability to know what is going on. What is going on is your body is injured, the experience of the injury is unpleasant, you do not like unpleasant things, you think it has to do with the food you ate yesterday or the idea that life has always treated you with difficulties, you solidify around these stories as proving something about yourself and you shut down to any possibilities besides getting rid of the pain as quickly as possible. Alleviating pain is useful, but healing and learning do not begin there. To actually learn, to actually heal, attention to all aspects of experience is the way. We have this neat thing, the body, which is how we experience the world. By bringing attention to the body, you become aware of your actions, your thoughts, your emotions and their effects on you, those around you and eventually the world at large. We practice body awareness to learn about how to live. Without awareness, life is merely a flat movie that we watch pass us by.

There are many methods to learn and heal by bringing attention to your body; here are some tips to get you started.

1. Be practical. If you are in pain, injured, emotionally upset, overweight, etc. definitely see help from a health care professional. It is essential that you address the issue that is occurring. It is essential for you, your family, your colleagues, and your friends. Listen to what they have to say. Educate yourself. Try out what they suggest. Notice the effects and proceed from there. You must do what needs to be done.

2. Take the opportunity to start a practice attention to the body. Find teachers and practitioners skilled in the study and practice of awareness through the body, through movement and through experiential meditation. There are many methods for awareness. Teachers have different skills. It is useful to be open enough to give different methods and teachers an opportunity to work with you. You can't lose. My suggestions are check out: www.feldenkrais.com, www.limsonline.com. Search the Internet on movement and awareness, body awareness, movement pattern analysis, meditation... If you meet someone who appears to know something about the body, ask them for some suggestions of classes and teachers. Investigate, become curious, examine, and explore what you do not know. Think about it this way. Do you like to be ignored or taken for granted by others? Nope. Neither does your body.

Here are a few starting points as you seek a teacher.

1. Experience your body resting.

Before you jump out of your bed alarmed by your clock, practice experiencing your whole body. What areas are the most released into your bed? What areas are not touching the surface below you? Without looking at, how long is your sense of your right leg? How far apart from your left leg is your right leg? What is the your sense of weight of your right leg? Is it the same as your left leg? Can you feel your pelvis? Do you know the bones of the pelvis look like? What part of your pelvis is touching the bed? What is your sense of space between the front of your torso and the back of your torso? How much room do your organs have in your torso? Which arm feels hotter? Which hand is most relaxed? Where does your tongue rest in your mouth? Can you tell that you are breathing? What is the quality of your breath (strained, slow, full)? Does one lung fill more deeply than the other? Where can you feel your body being moved by your breath (your abdomen, your sides, your mouth, your throat)? Now, feel your entire body again: your head and pelvis, your spine, your four limbs, the whole thing.

2. Experience your body in motion. Spend a few minutes walking with the intention of practicing experiencing your body movement. What is motivating and initiating the action of walking? Are your legs pulling you along? Is your head leading you onward? Is your sternum, chest, moving forward or is it resisting or frozen? Is your pelvis gliding forward or is it dragging behind you? What is each side of your body doing? What are your shoulder blades doing? What do they have to do with your chest? Are your arms stiff with anticipation or relaxed in cooperation? Are you holding any part of your body with unnecessary tension? (jaw, tongue, eyes, fingers, lower back, heart area, guts) What is the quality of your feet? Can you feel all of your toes, or just your smallest toe? Do your feet emphasize pushing, pulling, springing, or flopping as you walk? What is the experience of the overall quality of pressure? Is it easy to walk along or does it feel like the space is resisting your forward action? What happens to the pressure if you walk backwards or sideward? What is your sense of pace? Do you feel rushed or do you have all the time in the world? What is your sense of flow, do you feel bound up when you practice placing your attention on your body's movement or do you have a sense of free flowing ease? Notice the quality of space as you walk. Are you pinpointed with your focus, seeing only the sidewalk before you or are you global with your focus, seeing everything at once? What is your experience of the air as you move through space? Does the air feel hot, light, clear, fresh, thick, wet, and stuffy? Now, return to walking, moving through space, experiencing your body, your senses and the space all at once.

The body has its knowing. It is not verbal. It is not mental. The knowing of the body is truthful and clear. You do not need to spend your life being estranged from your body. It is here with you all the time, waiting. You can become intimate friends. It requires a willingness to attend and discipline to develop your skill. It is like adopting a new dog. At first you learn to observe the dog's movement behaviors, then you learn to communicate through movement with the dog, then the dog learns to trust you, open up and together you grow with respect, honor and devotion. Your body is not your enemy. It eagerly waits to show you the experience called life.