



c o n n e c t i o n s

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EMBODIMENT: JUST HOW DO WE DO THIS?

Sandra M. Kosse, LICSW

Welcome to this most recent issue of *East-West Connections*. This newsletter is produced three times a year and provides a forum where we explore various themes related to our work as therapists who are interested in integrating eastern and western psychological practices into our work. Our chosen theme this month is “Embodiment”. I’ve been fretting for a month now about what to write about and how to write it.

“Embodiment refers to the biological and physical presence of our bodies, which are a necessary precondition for subjectivity, emotion, language, thought and social interaction.” (*Musical Identities*, Macdonald, Hargreaves and Miell, 2002.) The dictionary tells me that embodiment is “representation in a physical body.” As in, “Her face embodied love to him.” Both of these definitions suggest the translation of experience into matter, the place where things show up. Without embodiment, everything is an abstraction. It is in embodiment that meaning, history, experience and life itself are manifest. Does this mean that without body, without form, nothing has being?

Beats me. I used to love this sort of speculation but that was before I became more embodied; embodied as in accepting the physicality of my life. For I dream of being a bodhisattva of compassion, but when my husband talks to me in a particular tone of voice (what one of my clients calls “bad tone”), my fists clench. Although I stopped hitting people before I was five, in these reactive minutes, my feelings are hardly those of a bodhisattva.

How can I have such high ideals and so consistently fall short? Is that what embodiment means? Actually, I think it is. It is in the body and through

the body that we translate idea into action and longing into doing, knowing that we live within our particular constraints of time, place, character and quirks. And knowing that we will often fall short of our ideals--because we are not “humanity” or “being” or “spirit” but we are our unique selves with this one “animal body”, “wild and precious life” as Mary Oliver writes.

This morning I drove past a mother and her son waiting in the rain for his school bus to arrive. She was sheltering under a newspaper and trying to extend it to cover her son’s head. He held himself away from the offered shelter. His face was upturned, his mouth wide open, his tongue extended to meet the rain. This seemed to me to “embody” this body life of ours. It is in the body that we meet the rain. Sometimes we protect ourselves, sometimes we open fully to what’s coming down.

I have to go outside now. It’s still pouring. Will I open my umbrella? Or my mouth? ☺

Sandra Kosse is singing in the rain just now, but will be back for the next issue.

**my body
you are kind to sit
and wait for me
while I’m away**

**I wander off
but you don’t budge
when I return to my true home
it is to you**

From **being bodies**, Friedman & Moo

BOOK review

Aligned, Relaxed, Resilient: The Physical Foundations of Mindfulness

Will Johnson

Shambala Press, 2000

Susan Bourgerie, MA, LP


This little gem of a book has been sitting on my bookshelf since it was published in 2000. It's had a lot of company, as I have such good intentions, am so curious, and somehow have confused having time to buy books with having time to read them!

Aligned, Relaxed, Resilient is a companion book to Johnson's earlier book *The Posture of Meditation* (Shambala, 1996). Unlike the first book, which focuses entirely on seated meditation practice, *Aligned, Relaxed, Resilient* takes the reader off of the meditation cushions and into an approach to mindfulness in the so-called mundane activities of everyday life. He provides concrete ways to deepen mindful awareness by connecting with body sensations, the life force as we experience it in each present moment. Noting the power of discursive thinking to pull us away from the present, he sees body experience as a balancing awareness. "Sensations and the pattern of involuntary thinking are like children at opposite ends of a teeter-totter," he notes in one of my favorite images. He doesn't negate the value of thinking, just reminds us of the importance of counterbalance. (Remember the painful "thud" of landing on the hard playground when the child on the other side jumped off?!)

Because of this unique emphasis on the pivotal role that the body plays in mindfulness practice, Johnson labels his approach "embodied mindfulness". "We live in a world that has become progressively disembodied," he astutely notes. Our technology, our sedentary life styles, our reliance on the activity of the mind to understand and deal with our world, and even our absorption in "talk therapy", take us away from intimate connection with the body. And isn't the body, after all, the only way we experience each unfolding moment of this human life? Leaving ourselves at the mercy of mind only, he believes, will leave us at the surface of daily experience each unfolding moment of this human life? Leaving ourselves at the mercy of mind only, he believes, will leave us at the surface of daily experience.

To help us dive below the surface, Johnson provides a variety of simple body awareness exercises. He organizes his thoughts in five simple sections: Sensations, Alignment, Relaxation, Resilience, and Integration. Each section contains rich description and practical application. In the Sensations section, for example, he takes us on a narrated tour of our own body. The exercise is more than just a typical body scan though; try it for yourself! (Note: Consider reading Johnson's exercises into a tape recorder so that you can follow his unique instructions without the distraction of having to stop and read.)

Johnson defines the posture of meditation as a three-legged stool. Alignment, relaxation, and resilience are these legs, and must be in balance to result in mindful alertness. Alignment of the body creates the axis around which our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives revolve. "Without alignment," he notes, "it is difficult to feel as though the earth is supporting us, and the passage of our days may be infused with a constant undertone of struggle." Practicing alignment grounds us. Once aligned, we can relax deeply, letting go of the body's holding patterns that compensate for being out of alignment. "Real relaxation involves letting down through the layers of holding and tension in our bodies and our minds so that these layers can naturally resolve themselves...revealing in their place a condition of deeply relaxed presence." Ahhhhh...Much better than numbing out in front of the television.

I encourage you to pick this book up if you're interested in moving yourself deeply into your body's mindful awareness of this moment, this day, this life. And don't let it sit on your shelf as long as I did! 

Susan Bourgerie is reminded, again and again, to put away the books and open up to the body.

PRACTICE

the value of embodying emotion

Pema Chodron's retreat, No Time To Lose, August 26-30, 2005, presented at Shambala Mountain Center, Red Feather Lakes, Colorado. Jil Leverone and Cheri Desmond May, attending.

Cheri Desmond May, MSW, LP, MaEd

To truly embody something is to feel it through and through, to integrate it into one's being so that it becomes a part of you. Any practice of mindfulness is just that, paying attention so carefully that the practice of paying attention becomes second nature. To get to the embodying part takes lots and lots of practice, over and over, without judgment, until it seeps into your being and becomes integrated into who you are. In meditation the basic instruction is to pay attention to the breath as the object of meditation, continually coming back to the breath and the present moment. What follows is an exercise that comes from Pema Chodron's teaching during the retreat cited above, and which, at its essence, is practicing embodiment.

Pema's teaching focused on patience and anger, and yet can apply to any negative emotion. She suggested that we dedicate ourselves to paying exquisite attention to our anger, getting to know it in such an intimate way that we could describe every facet of it as a 'felt sense' in our body and mind. She suggested that the intention of 'turning toward' our anger, of being patient with it, being curious about it, exploring it, feeling it with every fiber of our being will naturally lead to transformation (and, in the end, perhaps an ability to just 'let it go'). As part of our practice during the retreat, Pema invited us to make the object of our meditation an emotional state, in this case anger. This practice is described in the following exercise:

ANGER AS THE OBJECT. *Reflect on a situation that brings up your anger, hopefully one that has some charge or heightened energy to it. Make a decision and an intention to focus on this experience of your anger or irritation. Sit in meditation for some time with the focus being on the breath. Then shift so that the object of your meditation becomes your anger. Explore it with your senses. Notice if you are 'thinking' about it, and repeatedly come back to your felt sense of it instead. See it, breathe it, feel it, notice everything about it in your body—the tightness that comes to your neck and shoulders; the queasiness in your stomach; the intense desire to lash out; the flush of red that engulfs your face; the rapid beating of your heart; the impulse to scream or grab. Stay with this process, continually coming back to the felt sense of your anger when you become aware of being somewhere else. Notice how the experience of your anger transforms and is fluid. Allow a spaciousness and open heartedness to embrace your experience, whatever it is, and let it be. ☺*

Cheri found being with Pema awakened a felt sense of deep devotion to the teachings of this wise woman

resources: embodiment

- Chodron, P. (2005) No time to lose: A timely guide to the way of the bodhisattva. Boston: Shambala.
- Friedman, L. & Moon, S. (Eds.) (1997) being bodies: Buddhist women on the paradox of embodiment. Boston: Shambala.
- Johnson, W. (2000) Aligned, relaxed, resilient: The physical foundations of mindfulness. Boston: Shambala.
- Macnaughton, I. (Ed.) (2004) Body, breath and consciousness: A somatics anthology. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Audiotapes:

- Kabat-Zinn. (2005) Becoming a more mindful therapist. Parts 1 & 2. www.playbacknow.com.

Embodiment: Attention in Action

Signe Nestingen, PsyD, LP

Prelude: No matter who we are, when we sit in the chair of the client, we want and expect our therapist to be mindful and present with us in our session together, and empathic and compassionate in our relationship. To be able to do this totally requires attention and practice on the part of the therapist. The following piece describes an example of the internal process that could be experienced by a psychotherapist during a therapy session. It is introduced here as a training opportunity in integrating western psychological practice and eastern mindfulness meditation so that we, as therapists, may continue to be present with those we serve.

Embodiment: to bring together, to experience, in the body, to embrace.

I realize that for some time I have been struggling to find, within me, the place where mindfulness and psychotherapy meet. What does it mean to embody the practice of mindfulness and psychological knowledge in a session? Am I able to marry the practice of listening with an alive and vibrant compassion to the knowledge and skill of a psychological practitioner trained in a western model of psychology? Can I be fully alive and awake to the suffering of another with an open mind? A softened heart? What does it feel like to me when mindful listening and psychological practice meet? How do I know when/if/how I have embodied the essence of these two disciplines? How could this be expressed in one short article? To slow down the process and tap my internal experience I decided to sit down immediately after a session and write down what I remembered about my inner process. To respect the privacy of those I work with I chose to do this writing exercise a number of times. The following excerpt is a distillation of those initial stream of consciousness writing experiences.

To begin: As I sit with this client, striving to have no memory and no desire, I struggle with my knowledge of the client's history: what we last discussed, how late she was the last session, how unusual this is for her, how tearful she has become when talking about painful subjects. I begin to think about what defense mechanisms are active, what rule the super ego is

likely to demand she follow and how harshly or critically will it speak. I listen for her affect. Is it there? Not yet. Mostly I hear narrative. I catch myself and realize my inner conversation is overtaking the client. I remind myself to listen for her meaning, not to get lost in the story. I tell myself to let go of my clinical interpretation, let go my inner instructor, and listen for her experience.

As I listen I find myself feeling lonely. My thinking mind races in. Is this counter transference or am I listening to her experience? I comment on the loneliness. I speculate and wonder, out loud, if she has found herself feeling lonely. She denies she is lonely. However, she looks out the window and silently begins to cry.

I wait, moving back into myself. More conscious of the need to still myself, I shift my spine and realign my body. Move more into my body. Take a breath. Breathing into the space around my heart, I drop the tension in my jaw. I remind myself to sit in silence, to let go my thoughts, clinical interpretations, and judgments. To listen to the silence. I find I am feeling impatient. I wonder about her tears. Is she sad? Hurt? Angry? Wait, I say to myself, like telling a dog to sit and stay. This idea, of course, captures my inner humor and I realize I have moved away from listening.

I bring myself back with a breath. I remind myself to have an open mind, to let go hope, desire, or expectation. I remind myself to be as a beginner when learning to sit in meditation. I breathe deeply. I watch her body. Her shoulders shift and sag, she will not look at me. She bows her head, she continues to cry. I wait in silence for the crying to abate. It does. I shift my feet. I notice my mind

wander to my back, which is sore, and my head, which aches from the stuffiness of a cold. I notice that I am wondering how I am going to close the session, how will I tie in her presenting problems? She has been somewhat depressed, should I talk with her about depression? I notice I am categorizing her depressive symptoms. I wonder how agitated she is and I think about how depressed she was when we first met. Her level of depression has changed; it is not so deep, she seems more resilient, more aware of what is happening to her, better able to manage her symptoms. Still, I wonder if we need to discuss meds. I realize she is talking and I haven't been listening.

I begin to listen again. I pick up the thread of the story, shift in my seat. I lose track of her experience. I bring myself back with a breath. I remind myself to put my feet on the floor. To bring my attention back to my client, I let my inner chatter fade. I focus on the breath of my client. I watch her chest rise and fall. I listen to her voice. I notice she is speaking haltingly, telling me a story she has told before. I also notice she is sitting still.

I put my hands on my knees. I remember sitting in the sangha meeting, bringing my attention back to myself, to my breath, to the present. I remember to soften the place behind my heart, to listen with a compassionate and open heart - no fear, no hope.

I listen, then, to what is beneath her story, I let go her previous version. I shift my body and notice that she shifts hers. I notice my elbow on the edge of my chair and hers on the edge of her chair. I notice that I gently rub my arms, one arm and then the other. I notice that as she talks she does the same. We are with each other. We speak of comfort. We talk about how she might be more compassionate with herself. We talk about loneliness and what has changed in her life since we met. We talk about grief, crying, and her openness to herself. I move back into my breath. I listen, again. I see that she is speaking with more animation. She is telling me another part of the story. I listen, again, trying to put judgment aside.

I listen as she describes a current problem and I am aware of my limitations. I begin to judge my clinical skills. I notice I feel inadequate and I realize my own discomfort only when I hear that what is coming out of my mouth is a problem solving technique. Inwardly I wince, noticing my judgment about my lack of therapeutic skill at this moment. I take a deep breath, breathing into my belly. I straighten my spine, remind myself no fear, no hope. I begin to listen again, bringing my awareness back to my

client. I listen and then find that I am itemizing defense mechanisms. I shove my inner chatter aside and listen to my client. She seems more relaxed, less tense. I comment on this and look at the clock. I realize soon we need to end this session and that I have to summarize the session before we stop. All sorts of thoughts crowd into my mind at that point, as if I have kept myself as still as I can for as long as I can. I can feel that familiar end of session pressure. My mind begins to race over the session. I simultaneously wonder what I have missed and hope that somehow, in the last five minutes, I can make up for anything I missed during the rest of the session, or ever in my entire body of work with her!

I take a deep breath. I take another breath. I flash back to each of us rubbing our own arms, simultaneously, separate, together, and I remind myself of the ways we have connected in this session. This calms my inner turmoil and I listen. I recall the ways our conversation seemed to touch her. I can attend now to what she will take with her. I listen and we bookmark the session. We stand and say goodbye at the door. I find myself taking a deep breath - then I sit down and write.

Psychotherapy is an intimate, and often painful, process. Layer after layer of suffering is revealed. In western psychology we name suffering. We hold it by providing labels such as depression, anxiety, grief, sorrow, pain, shame, lack of relationship, loneliness, anger, greed, and fear. In eastern thought we might hold suffering in the light of compassion. Returning again and again to the idea that we cannot extinguish suffering but with empathy, clarity, kindness, and gentle humor we may find we are not so bound by it. In the practice of meditation, as in psychotherapy, the mind wanders.

In either situation, the challenge for the practitioner is to hold the suffering, to bring the focus back to the present. In doing so, we keep ourselves open to suffering, and to the alleviation of that suffering.



Signe Nestingen continues to breathe deeply, in and out of the chair.

For Mental Health Professionals
Mindfulness II: Deepening Your Practice.
Jan. 13 – Feb. 17, 2006, 6 Fridays from 1:30-4:00. Instructors: Dr. Mary Androff/Cheri Desmond May. Contact Cheri at 651.698.0508 or cheri@desmondmay.com.



East-West Connections is a collaborative effort to publish information of interest to our colleagues, clients, and others on the integration of Eastern wisdom and practices, and Western approaches to psychotherapy. If you have comments, questions, or would like to request that your name be added to or removed from this mailing list, contact any one of us.

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ANNOUNCING . . .

Bringing Eastern Wisdom and Practice to Life in Our Work: Applications for Us and Those We Serve, a conference presented by the Minnesota Psychological Association, will take place on November 11-12, 2005. See www.mnpsych.org for details.

Susan Bourgerie will be offering a course called **Settling the Mind** starting in January, 2006. See inside flyer for details.

Contact Susan for information or referrals. (See contact information above.)

