

The Body: A Practice of Presence

By J. Tamar Stone

Be here now. Wherever you go, there you are. Chop wood, carry water. Indeed, the present is where the entire world resides. But to be fully present in our life, we must reside in our own body. After all, what's chopping the wood, carrying the water? What's taking you wherever you go? What's being here now?

In the mind-body-spirit trinity, our body tends to be the least valued as we travel the spiritual path. We devote lots of time and money to stretching and exercising our mind, feeding and renewing our spirit; but think nothing of skipping meals, checking office email while on vacation, using toxic products in our home. Whether or not we choose to actively expand our knowledge and consciousness, our body remains the breathing, blood-pumping organism that moves us through our life. It is the place of integration, of grounding, for mind and spirit.

Your Body, Your Selves

Bodies are as individual as snowflakes, externally and internally. Our body is a reservoir of information, a blueprint of our genetics, our personal and ancestral history, our sense-based preferences. It is a delegation of parts, each with its own personality, opinions, and perspectives. The Body Dialogue Process invites conscious communication with the body's overall voice and the voices of its parts. Hearing and valuing the body's own knowledge base is essential to cultivating a healthy relationship—an intimate friendship—with our body. Imagine the kind of relationship you have with your significant other or best friend, a connection based on mutual respect, effective communication, and pleasure in each other's company. This possibility exists with your body.

The Body Dialogue Process was inspired by the Voice Dialogue Process, the Psychology of Selves, and my personal experience with a physically disabling illness in my late twenties. Body Dialogue uniquely helps bridge the divide between mind and body—a chasm, for some, reinforced by Western educational and socioeconomic values.

The body and its many parts want to be heard and recognized for the significant role they serve in our overall well-being. A seeming diehard machine of invisible and involuntary functions, our body often goes unappreciated and unacknowledged. We forget that we, and all our subpersonalities, or selves, be, do, go, speak in and through the container of the body. Without the body, there would be no selves.

What we disown we attract, so explains the Psychology of Selves. For example, someone who's overly responsible and refuses to take a break likely attracts into their life—and is irritated by—seemingly irresponsible or lazy people. Those “lazy” people, however, may actually be embodying a message that the overly responsible person needs to hear: “Relax! Take a load off!”

Such messages can also come to us internally. For example, a body amped-up or driven by our overachiever self may attempt to get our attention by creating a little tension, a headache, eventually a cold or flu. If we don't read these early-warning cues that the body gives to help us, our body must resort to screaming to get our attention.

That very situation catalyzed my discovery of the Body Dialogue Process. While I, ironically enough, was working at a Health Maintenance Organization, my Type-A self established a daily routine of taking the eight-flight stairwell to and from the cafeteria for exercise. What that self didn't factor in was my high heeled pumps. Night after night of intense muscle cramping in my legs apparently was not enough to alarm me.

A diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis did get my attention—and launched me on my healing journey. To minimize my joint pain, I had to sit, stand, walk, lift a glass more consciously and, in doing so, learned how to move my body according to its natural alignment. At the same time, I'd been curious about why only

certain parts of my body hurt. To get some answers, I decided to adapt the Voice Dialogue Process to my body. When I asked my hands why they ached so much, they said, “We’re furious. Your boyfriend doesn’t appreciate our touch.” They also told me, “We’re exhausted from all the paper-pushing. We crave a creative outlet.”

The Body Dialogue Process is one of those outlets. My hands love that I do for others what I did for them. A client of mine came in one day with an acidic stomach, an increasingly frequent condition for him. In giving voice to his stomach, we discovered that it had become part of an information feedback system and would burn whenever he didn’t express what was really going on with him emotionally. Tracking some incidents in his life, he realized the validity of his stomach’s message. Shortly thereafter, he reversed the pattern by speaking his truth in the moment to his girlfriend, mother, and brother.

Your Body, Your Path

When we have a conscious relationship with our body, we eat when we’re hungry, sleep when we’re tired, and exercise or move when our body feels the impulse to. The authentic voice of the body doesn’t demand to eat to feed our emotional needs the way the inner-child self does. The listened-to body doesn’t need to drink coffee to generate a second wind. The appreciated body exercises because it feels good, not because the culturally programmed internal critic says it should be thinner.

The Body Dialogue Process exposes those selves that hijack our relationship with our body and increase our vulnerability for injury and illness over time. Establishing a line of communication with our body and its parts allows us to more proactively manage our well-being rather than live at the effect of our counterproductive unconscious patterns. Less critical but just as necessary for a life of presence is honoring our body’s preferences—for example, choosing clothing for comfort and style versus style and comfort, creating a home environment that soothes and rejuvenates, and blocking out time for rest, recreation, and reflection.

Your Body, Your Being

Our five senses are the doorway to being fully present in our body. And when we’re present in our body, we become more connected with our surroundings and the larger world. Living in the body isn’t a perfected state, but rather being with *what is*: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting life as it arises in the moment. When we perceive from the lens of the body as a whole, it’s like a seventh sense—a synergistic experience of all the senses. The whole *is* greater than the sum of its parts.

The body wants to be related to as the physical being that it is. We humans are a physical species, members of the animal kingdom. As our culture has evolved industrially then technologically, we’ve gone from working the land, to working the assembly line, to working the mouse. The more we’ve gotten into our head, the more we’ve lost connection with our inherent physicality and instinctual nature. Animals, wild and domestic, fascinate us: they spend their days watching, hunting, eating, napping, moving according to their primal urges, creatures of the moment. Similarly, professional athletes captivate us, in part because they demonstrate superhuman physical abilities, but also because they’re more connected with their innate animal nature. Repressing or disowning our instinctual energies over time suppresses our body awareness and natural vitality, and may lead to injury and illness.

Because divine mystery plays a part in directing the steps of our path, judging illness as a less desirable path to presence is misguided—and counterproductive to the healing process. Pain, injury, and illness are rich opportunities to explore possible underlying psychological, emotional, or spiritual imbalances. Body Dialogue supports the overall healing process by directly accessing the psychophysical patterns that may have given rise to the condition. Honoring our body’s voice creates greater health, pleasure, and capacity to hold its many selves. All we have to do is learn to listen.