

Movement as Medicine: Body Wisdom for Modern Times

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We live in exciting times. Scientific knowledge about the human body has grown tremendously in just the past 30 years. In addition, discoveries in the fields of bodywork, sports psychology and the somatic arts continuously reveal new understandings about the body and more options for self-care. The somatic arts emphasize movement awareness and action from the inside out so anyone at any age can participate and collaborate with their body. You can even sit in a chair and have an easy, stimulating and healthy encounter with your body's intelligence. This idea may be surprising if you think there has to be effort and strain for a healthy body! Yet many of us don't know about our bodily intelligences through no fault of our own. Physical education in most schools is exclusively sports education, and has little to do with learning physiological self-regulation or understanding the basics of bodily intelligence. We learn to use our body as an instrument to perform and accomplish a competitive goal. Does this create an implicit association in the brain between movement and performance, and between movement and outcomes? Are we comparing our physical performance with others, or with standardized goals? Are we competing against ourselves?

The lack of a truly comprehensive physical education has left many of us at a disadvantage, with no enduring skill set for navigating life as bodies on Earth. In spite of the groundbreaking achievements of allopathic medicine in the last 30 years, the majority of modern illnesses are what doctors refer to as "lifestyle diseases". Obesity, heart disease, and diabetes can be positively influenced with even minimal physical activity, such as 30 minutes of walking a day. Yet, the healing power of movement and what is possible is still a mystery in the mainstream. Imagine what we could do if we had a diverse template of action to explore and illuminate our bodily intelligence. After many years of working with the body and its expression, especially with people challenging chronic illness, I formulated a conceptual template in 2000 - "movement as medicine". What can we pro-actively do for our health with what we have been given by nature? What technologies are actually hard-wired at birth in our system so we can easily access and activate wellness? I identified five indigenous technologies of bodily intelligence: **breath, vocalization, contact, stillness, and movement**. These technologies can be used for an articulate dialogue within your body to cultivate physical health, emotional well-being and creative satisfaction.

The five technologies are each distinctly different in how they impact the body; you have multiple pathways to pursue and enjoy. And once you learn the parameters of these technologies and shape them to your liking, connection with your body is available at any moment. Your body is with you 24/7, so it is not

necessary to create another segment in an overly scheduled life to squeeze in body time. Whether you take a few minutes sprinkled here and there throughout the day, or give yourself a longer time frame for practice, incorporating the five technologies into your daily rhythm can make the difference between living anxiously and breathlessly, or graciously and securely.

Let's take a moment to focus on the first technology: breath. You might ask, why learn to breathe? Breathing just happens automatically - I'm already breathing! True enough, yet breath is also a voluntary action that can be modulated and controlled by the central diaphragm. It is a versatile instrument - once you learn various ways to play it, you can create amazing music. By altering the tempo, force and duration of the inhale, of the exhale, and of the pauses in-between in your breathing, your internal chemistry changes, which alters your mood, your state of mind, and your feelings. Breathe slowly to sedate energy and relax. Breathe quickly to stimulate energy and invigorate.

The average flex of the central diaphragm is about 1 inch, whereas for people who practice deep diaphragmatic breathing, the flex is between 2.5 - 3.5 inches. Breath and vocalization practices create greater flexibility and strength in the diaphragm, which impacts not only your respiration, but in other bodily systems as well. Your abdominal organs are massaged and pulsed by the movement of the diaphragm, keeping them toned and in shape. And a burden is taken off your heart when you breathe deeply and fully; the diaphragm shares the heart's workload, enabling easier circulation and maximizing oxygen exchange in the cells.

Action: *Take a few regular breaths now with awareness. What do you notice? Is your breathing strained or easy, shallow or full? Notice what happens with your ribcage, shoulders, and back. Do you lift your ribcage and breathe upwards? Many people breathe this way, indicating primary use of the intercostal muscles of the ribcage. Those muscles are actually designed to be the helpers, not the main moving force. That is the role of the central diaphragm: a 360-degree, dome-shaped muscle, which divides your chest from your belly. Place your hands on your solar plexus (the area in the front of your body where the ribcage opens outwards) to make contact with the central diaphragm. Each time you inhale, the diaphragm contracts, flattens out and presses down towards your pelvis. Each time you exhale, it relaxes and floats back up towards your heart. My favorite image for this action is that of a jellyfish, pressing down and floating back up in the depths of the ocean, with all the time in the world.*

Taking advantage of the harmonious design and functioning of your body not only creates efficient action, but also increases the pleasure of being a moving body. And as we all know, if it feels good, we are more

motivated and inclined to practice. In my workshops, classes and individual sessions, I teach how you can collaborate with your body - playfully, pragmatically, and pleasurably. Some people may think that play, pleasure and pragmatism are an impossible and paradoxical combination, but remember how we originally participated with our bodies. All you have to do is observe infants, young children and animals approaching movement: you can see how the sensory aliveness of being a body in motion is one of the great delights of life on earth! So, take a moment now - and then each day hereafter - to appreciate, employ and enjoy your breathing body as an initial foray back into the garden of your body. As a 72-year old client remarked: "I didn't know that life could be so much fun and so interesting at this stage of my life."

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