

FINDING YOUR BODY'S MIND

“The mind is like the wind; the body is like the sand. If you want to know which way the wind is blowing, watch the sand.” (Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen)

Even when we are still, we are moving. Blood circulates, lymph flows, the heart beats, stomach juices swirl, cerebral spinal fluid pulses, cells migrate, rib case and lungs expand and contract. There is a universe of silent movement occurring inside us every second.

There is no conscious effort to these movements. I do not have to decide to digest my food. If I eat something my digestive system, governed by my brain, takes care of it.

In contrast to these involuntary movements are the movements I decide to do, or voluntary movements. Voluntary movement is active; it requires consciousness, intent and will. When I decide to brush my teeth I must first have the intent and the will to perform that activity before I can reach out with my hand to grasp the toothbrush, put toothpaste on the brush and bring it to my mouth.

Even though I must have the conscious intent to brush my teeth, there are times when I do not remember if I did or did not! So even though I have made a conscious decision to brush my teeth, I do not have to stay conscious of brushing my teeth to achieve my goal.

Brushing my teeth is a habitual act, a series of movements that have been recorded in my sensory and kinesthetic memory. This memory allows me to perform this activity unconsciously. While I am brushing my teeth I can plan my day or be seized by a wild idea for a new dance or poem. This ability to do one thing and think about another is a wonderful advantage of the human organisms' larger brain.

Like all positives though, there is an inherent negative in this advantage. If I am thinking about my idea for a new dance or planning my day while I'm brushing my teeth, I cut myself off from much of the sensory information I am receiving from my movement. The skin, joints and muscles have sensory receptors that telegraph information to my brain about pressure, pain and the position of my body, among other things. These sensory receptors, our proprioceptors, are the internal eyes of the body. They transmit a continuous sensory flow from the movable parts of my body and have been called our secret sense.

In his book "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat", Oliver Sacks tells the story of Christina, "The Disembodied Lady". Christina lost all proprioception through a rare nerve disease. In her despair she once cried to Dr. Sacks: "If only I could feel! But I've forgotten what it's like. It's like something's been scooped out of me, right at the center .."

In a most fundamental and profound way my proprioceptors let me know that I exist for they allow me to "feel myself". In fact, Dr. Sacks states in his marvelous book, "A Leg To Stand On", "... if Descartes only knew about proprioception, this mind-body split would never have happened."

Movement activates my proprioceptors and it is the feel of my movement that offers me a view into my body's mind. Increased awareness of my movement and postural patterns comes from attending to my sensory system. I can use this wonderful and exquisite sensory system to enhance and deepen my ability to find and communicate with body's mind.

Let's go back to my teeth brushing. Instead of thinking about my new dance or planning my day, I've tuned into my body and feel a strain in my neck, shoulders and lower back. A common response is the "put" the shoulders down and "straighten up". But, my body's mind does not understand these "commands". My body's mind loves remembered sensations and images. Instead of "putting" shoulders down I can call upon a pleasurable sensation of a past movement. I can allow my shoulders to *slide down towards my hips*. Sliding was one of my favorite childhood activities so it is deeply encoded in my sensory system. My nervous system truly understands that "command". Instead of "straightening up" I can imagine and feel a *fountain of water flowing up through my spine*. Using sensations and images is a more direct, powerful, pleasurable and playful way of communicating with my body. My nervous system has a beautiful and innate wisdom and if given the chance, it will engage the best neuromuscular pathway to produce my movement goal. This manner of communicating allows me to engage myself fully and change habitual patterns from the inside out.

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