

Living and Learning From our Body

Being fully present, communicating mutually with others, and embodying our personal commitments to ourselves, and in service to the world, are goals that are more easily accomplished through the alignment of our mind's, heart's, and bodies. In this paper I will outline how enlisting your body's wisdom in your quest for engagement with yourself and the world can help light the way.

Living can challenge at best when we interpret and respond to the world from the psychic structures that we have come to know as our ego or personality. We are each born with a unique compass that provides the basis for how we see the world. As children we become constrained and/or confused by messages that we receive from "out there" (our parents and institutions) and lose sight of this unique and personal gift that resides within each of us. Over time we learn to shut off and disown these parts of ourselves from awareness.

When we are able to be present and mindful of our own inner energy or excitation we can more in touch with our personal compass and more connected to our



sense of purpose. When we view the world through our personality or ego we live a life divided between how we believe we should be and the rules that we have learned for behaving. This often leads to a gnawing feeling that we are either not acting in accordance with our true nature or are disconnected from a part of ourselves. Over time, and as our

recognition of this dissonance becomes more apparent, we begin to ask ourselves questions about why we don't feel satisfied and what our purpose is in life.

Regaining access to our uniqueness solely through a greater understanding of our personality or ego is complicated by the dilemma of trying to solve problems using the same paradigm that created them. Engaging the wisdom of the body in our search provides some helpful clarity and a fuller understanding of our connection with and place in the world. The more that we are able to connect with our personal aliveness and uniqueness the better able we are to express through our words and our actions that which we hold dear. The more that we are able to express our passion and motivation the better able we are to have an impact on the life that we are a part of.

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Utilizing what I call the Growth Spiral Process (GSP) we can learn to be in touch with and understand our connection to ourself, our purpose, and to others. The GSP flows within us, between ourselves and others, and to and from our experiences. It aligns and connects us with our personal experience and, through our interactions and experiences, changes both our essence and that which we come in contact with. The Growth Spiral is a never ending process of awareness, engagement, and change that includes:

- AWARENESS
- CENTERING
- FLOW
- PURPOSE

Awareness of our current state begins the process. We all have energy and excitatory responses that flow within us and out into the world. We all have characteristic and conditioned ways of responding. For example, if someone comes up behind me and yells my name I will tighten the muscles in my face, raise my shoulders, and tighten the muscles in my stomach and chest. These are my typical responses to stressful situations. Similarly, when engaged in a heated argument I respond in the same way. This pattern of responding to the world began early in my life and has become automatic and unconscious. For years I was unaware of my physical response to these responses and even less aware of the gradual armoring of my body that resulted. This armor and my defensive response to difficult situations was habituated and was created to protect me from danger.

These habituated responses that have become a way of life affect our ability to be calm and fully available to interrelate with others. Much of the time we live and respond to



the world from these reflexive and programmed ways. The way that we contain our energy the more rigid our boundaries become. If our typical way of being is contracted like the one I described above, we tend to not only take on that body shape as normal but also begin to perceive our experiences similarly. In my example, my experience became one of seeing life as full obstacles and

burdens rather than ease and flow. Even when not upset, my body will convey message

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that I am stressed and not fully available and I will experience the world, and others may experience me, from that perspective.

By learning new practices, we can become aware of our defensive posture or shape, and learn to let go of it releasing our body into calmness and flexibility. From this calmness we can be fully aware of the sensations and messages that our body is sending us (being present) rather than limited by our anticipatory expectation of a threat that we feel. Learning where we store our tension and where we have built our armor allows us to begin to let go of it and feel ourselves and experience others more completely. Because our physical and mental states are inextricably connected, being able to be aware of and modulate our physical state will also ultimately affect our mental state.

Centering is the process of bringing our full attention into the moment and releasing the tension in our body. Centering practices allow us to connect with the energy within us and the energy that surrounds us, to feel grounded to the earth and aligned with the heavens, and to allow gravity to deepen our felt sense of the wholeness of our body. When we release the tension in our muscles we are no longer resisting gravity and can feel the experience of our entire body being supported by the ground beneath us. The more time we spend “grounded” the greater our sense of having found a home within our body and a connection to our selves free of thoughts about the past and future, worries and tension. We are then free to reach out from this home base to engage in new experiences and also to return there when necessary. Often, when engaged with others, we lose our sense of self and get lost in their emotions. Knowing this, and sensing the shift, we can return home to our center and a place of calmness and safety responding to the emotions from within our own boundaries and make choices that make sense to us.



Centering is a simple practice that allows us to breakdown old tendencies and patterns by letting go and relaxing into our body. Practicing this process ultimately changes our perceptions and responses to our experience. The more present (grounded or relaxed) we are the more able we are to consciously direct our actions and make choices.

Practicing means doing something over and over again until we are good at it or until it becomes natural and automatic. We've unconsciously practiced ways of being that have

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led to how we currently experience the world. With time and commitment we can practice new ways of being that bring greater satisfaction and a sense of well-being.

As an example of practicing, when I began running I did so to improve my health and to keep weight off. As I got better at it I gained more and more control over my body as it became better able to do this thing I was asking it to do. With each new accomplishment my confidence and sense of myself grew stronger and I felt more in my body and better able to see what it is capable of. Running suddenly took on a new quality. I found myself experiencing the world in a different way. Standing taller, feeling stronger, and projecting more confidence and awareness that the skills that I had developed through running were transferring to other aspects of my life.

Flow emerges from our centered state. Being able to relate with experiences outside ourselves and return to our body to regain balance and center allows us to open to new and unfamiliar experiences in a way that we cannot when we are hidden behind our armor and defenses. We can allow our unique energy to flow outwards affecting others while also allowing the world outside ourselves to affect changes within us. We can express our personal commitments and receive from others without defending. We can open ourselves to diversity, to new paradigms of thought, and to connecting deeply with others and with our environment. We can maintain safe and open boundaries from which to operate and a home to return to for safety and reflection.

Whereas presence or centering is an individual experience, Flow most often occurs when interacting with something outside ourselves. Flow can be experienced when we



experience our own energy flowing within us as when we do a body scan. Most often however it happens when we interact with the world, are affected by it and in turn affect the world. Examples include staring into the night sky and being moved by the vastness, watching a beautiful sunset, holding your lover's hand, reading a beautiful poem, or engaging in a deeply moving dialogue with someone. In each case, we are in the moment and, for all intents and purposes, we experience the sense of nothing else existing and time standing still. We are engrossed in a timeless, and moving

experience in which we are somehow changed at the cellular level.

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Here are a few of my personal examples of how I experience Flow in my own life. See if you resonate with any of these examples or have your own.

I have a personal intention to not kill other creatures whether sentient or otherwise. So, when I see a spider in my home, even though my first reaction may be fear (I have a slight fear of them), I recognize them as living creatures and communicate my intention to find a way for us to live side by side. I then find a way to transport the spider gently from the space in my house to outside and release it. During these moments, I feel an connection to the creature and a sense of being fully in the present with it. Nothing else exists during this time. I have no way of knowing if the spider is aware of my presence or intention but am fully aware of my having been transformed by my interaction with it. Compare this experience with one in which you see the spider, feel afraid, find the first thing you can use to kill it, with and crush it. This is an unconscious reactive and automatic response that does not take into consideration anything but one's own feelings.

I love animals. I also find them to be a mirror of my presence. When I'm with them and present I feel their spirit, their unconditional love, and their dependence on me for their survival. In taking responsibility for them, I make a commitment to taking care of, feeding, and making time to interacting with them in a way that communicates and honors my recognition of their place in the world and in my life. When present with them I feel our mutual connection and regard. I experience their mood, their love (many kisses and a wagging tail) and their need for my attention. Often when I take my dog for a walk, I become aware of being somewhere else. I'm thinking about my schedule, problems, fears, or upcoming events. Yet, here I am walking on a beautiful day with this wonderful creature disconnected from our mutual dependence. When I become aware of being away, I bring myself back to the present. Back to the mutuality, back to being connected to the energy that exists between us, that transforms us, and that provides an imprint of the collective awareness between us. This is what I mean by flow. From my center. They are already there and await our return when we allow our thoughts to take us away.

Nature is yet another way in which I can experience the flow and connection between myself and the world around me. Late on a clear dark night I look into the starry sky and am lost into the immenseness of that of which I am a part of. Walking through the woods I focus on the many varieties of trees and shrubbery and recognize the energy that they bring alive within me. Standing on a beach at sunset and watching as the sun slips slowly into the horizon bringing me in touch with the constant ebb and flow of life I find myself at one with that never ending process.

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In each of these experiences I am more than just an observer I am also a part of each. Recognizing the message that each imprints within me I am forever changed by each. Having been changed by each I in turn see differently and interact with my world in new more present ways. The more that I am present the more of these experiences I have. Having discovered this gift I am increasingly motivated to engage in those practices that help me to expand my awareness and my appreciation of the great mystery of which we are all a part.

Presence is the state from which we project who we are into the world. I'm sure you've had many different responses to the energy of others that colored how you felt about them and how you responded to and interacted with them. We feel peaceful and calm with some and edgy and defensive with others. We trust certain leaders and would follow them anywhere while questioning the the integrity and intentions of others. Our own presence affects those that we are in contact with and others respond to us based on that identity.

An example of how our presence impacts our interactions with others is through language and communication. Our current state, whether closed or open, will affect our use of language in a way that maintains the flow of communication or shuts it down. We are all aware of the importance of open communication in organizations and in our personal lives and yet research suggests that when in difficult or stressful situations at least 95% of us resort to patterns of communication that are unilateral in nature and are aimed at defending and restricting the flow of information to maintain the status quo. The consequences of this kind of communication are mistrust, misunderstanding, and limited learning.

Other models of communication allow a two way flow of ideas in which differences are opportunities for learning rather than conflicts to be avoided, everyone has access to the same information, thoughts and feelings are shared openly and safely, and there is a recognition that each of us has information that others do not. We all tend to believe that the view of reality that we hold is the right one and shut down communication with others who see the world differently.

Another way of looking at how our style of communication can affect flow is to compare examples of both open and closed ways of communicating and to identify which is our tendency. Below are words that typify both styles. See where you fall and which are

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more present in your personal and work lives. Reflect on how each style affects your interactions and relationships with others.

OPEN

Ease

Trust

Collaborative

Curious

Opportunities

Energized

CLOSED

Effort

Defensiveness

Competitive

Judgmental

Obstacles

Exhausted

Open communication flows from ease and groundedness while closed communication flows from stress and defense. We have choices about which we want to practice.

Flow is bi-directional. First, when we are more at ease we tend to be more authentic. We are less defensive, we communicate a sense of safety through both our manner or



posture and through our choice of words. This puts others at ease. Second, being at ease, others are more likely to be open to hearing and understanding a different perspective or view of the world and to share their own. From this two way flow of energy and understanding we are more susceptible to having our world view impacted and our personal experience of the world changed. Typically, being confronted with different perceptions of the world are

cause for conflict and we are all acutely aware of the suffering caused by such differences in the world we live in. This two way process leads to understanding and transformation.

PURPOSE flows from our ongoing interaction and connectedness with our own inner experience and our openness to what arises from our interactions. As we've seen, learning happens not just at a cognitive level but also at a somatic or physical level. Often when trying to reason through problems we find that the right answer for us is the one that "feels" right. So, living and learning is not just about concepts and ideas but it is also in the experience of our body that we can have the opportunity to contact and learn from the process of being alive. It is also through living more fully in our body that

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we come to lead lives that incorporate a sense of purpose and an answer to the question “for the sake of what?” Our purpose, once identified and put into words, flows from the center of our being, expressing our personal passion, motivation, and commitment to a vision for the future. Our words are actions and when connected with our aliveness or excitement we can say that we embody our intentions. The alignment of our intentions, our words, and our presence paves the way for creating what matters most to us in the world. What was simply a feeling or a thought becomes a reality. Answering the following questions can help you to identify what it is that matters to you.

- What is important to me?
- Why is it important to me?
- Who is important to me?
- Why are they important to me?
- How do I want to live my life?
- What is a satisfying and fulfilling life?

These questions and other strategies can be used to identify and deepen our understanding of our purpose and, when communicated from a centered state, that purpose takes on a power that comes from the alignment of our heart, mind and body. Our intentions may include making changes in our own lives (losing weight etc.) and take on even more power when tied to goals that involve the greater good. For example, my own personal purpose statement is to be fully present and connect compassionately. While this intention satisfies my own need to feel at peace and to give of myself to others, it also, through association, allows others to feel touched by our interactions and to be motivated themselves to make the world a more peaceful place which is at the core of my purpose and intention in the world. This same intention supports all of my practices be it running, sitting, or centering. No longer are my practices just tasks to be done but rather a part of my bigger intention to be a model for peace in the world. Think of the difference between trying to get yourself to do a practice just because it's good for you and doing it because in doing so you're creating a different world.

This process of Awareness, Center, Flow, and Purpose is never ending as we continue to change and be changed by the world. Life continues to evolve through us and as we continue to work with our personal stories we will return once again to awareness. When I declare my commitment, what is it I feel in my body? Do I feel centered and connected to the commitment or do I feel constricted or contracted? Once you feel the complete

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alignment of your words with your essential self you will be back to your center and confident and clear about allowing it to flow out into the world.

The skills associated with the Growth Spiral Process are easily learned yet require a commitment and an intention to practice being more present and connected to the world around us. Like any other skill we learn, whether intentional or not, we become that which we do repeatedly. The confluence of these skills is powerful. Still, we must embark on this journey of self exploration gently. We are unlearning a way of being in the world that served us well at one point in our lives. Be patient and be kind to yourself as you embark on this journey.

Using these skills you can accomplish a great many of the the changes that you have wanted to make in your life. Below you will find exercises that go along with each part of the Growth Spiral. Each is to be done for a specified duration before moving onto the next.

AWARENESS:

Breathing - Focus on your breath. Let yourself breath naturally following the breath as you inhale and then exhale. Relax your abdominal muscles and allow your stomach to fill up like a balloon and let the in breath continue to expand filling the chest cavity fully and then when it feels appropriate, release the breath making a vocal sound slowly exhaling and following the breath until you have fully exhaled and it is time to take another and repeat the cycle. When exhaling, imagine the breath traveling either to a spot about 3 inches below your navel (your center) or down through your feet into the ground.

Body Scan– begin to notice the places in your body where you tense yourself in response to stress or difficult situations. Throughout the day, or during difficult situations, scan your body and when you find tension send a breath there and release the tension. Remember to check your shoulders, chest, hands, face and jaw.

Let Go, Let Gravity - While sitting, feel yourself sink into the surface you are sitting on. Feel the back of your legs, buttocks and back against the surface and feel the weight of your body sinking you deeper into the seat. Allow yourself to feel the sensation of gravity in your arms, legs, face and head.

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Simple Meditation - Sit or lay comfortably. Close your eyes and take three deep breaths in through your nose, exhaling through your mouth. Let your breath return to normal and begin to simply focus on your breathing noticing your breath as you inhale and then exhale. Just notice what is without changing anything. Notice the rising and falling of your chest and/or your abdomen as you breathe and feel the breath as it enters through your nose. If you notice any places in your body that are tense send a breath there and release the tension and then return to your breathing. If you notice thoughts arising just gently notice them and return your attention to your breath. The idea is not to be able to be without thoughts but rather to notice when you have them and be able to return your focus to your breathing. Continue for 10-20 minutes.

CENTERING:

Grounding - A simple strategy is to place both feet on the floor and feel your groundedness. Doing this during difficult situations is a simple method of bringing yourself into the present and providing a solid foundation for your responses. You can do this while sitting or you can do it standing by feeling your feet firmly on the ground.

Centering - Stand with your arms at your sides relaxed. Place your feet approximately shoulder width apart finding a distance that is comfortable. Bend your knees just slightly while straightening your back and feeling your body lifting skyward as if a thread was pulling you upwards. Allow your head to tilt downward slightly releasing the stress on your neck. You may do this exercise with your eyes open or closed. If you do it with your eyes open, allow your gaze to focus slightly downward a few feet in front of you. Feel the bottoms of your feet touching the ground rocking backward and forward and side-to-side finding a comfortable grounded position to stand in. As you stand there scan your body and release any tension that you feel. Take two or three deep breaths as described above remembering to make a sound with your exhale focusing your attention on the breath/sound until it is fully exhaled and allow your natural rhythm to lead into the next breath.

Next, focus on gravity. See if you can feel the effects of gravity in your arms, legs, face, and head. Allow your face muscles to relax and your jaw to drop and remain open slightly. Now begin to study the energy field around you. As a culture, we are very forward oriented and rarely sense anything else around us. Ask yourself if you can sense the same amount of space in front of you as in the back, right and left, and above

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your head and below your feet. Spend a few seconds on each space sensing and imaging the space around you. When you go into difficult situations with this sense of wholeness you are more available and more present. Lastly, feel the sense of gravity throughout your body and this felt sense of presence and move on.

Doing this fully can take a couple of minutes but you can do briefer versions throughout the day. Ideally, doing this 10 times a day is most effective. You can also do this while sitting, or while lying down. This is a practice like learning to play golf or learning to meditate. It will become second nature after awhile and you will sense this feeling at other times even when not practicing. At times when you notice yourself tensing allow yourself to move back into center. It does get easier!

FLOW:

Self Observation: Two or three times each day reflect on conversations or experiences that you've had that were reflective of you being present and experience Flow. Journal about those experiences, how they made you feel, and what the result of having the experience was.

Two or three times each day reflect upon times in which rather than being fully present you were off somewhere else and not fully engaged in the experiences that you were having. Journal about these experiences, how they made you feel, and what the result of the experience was.

Practice: Once a week review your journaling and make a commitment to create opportunities for yourself to experiences in which you can experience Flow. Examples might be before entering a conversation, taking a walk with your dog, finding time to get out into nature, or simply engaging in the centering or body scan exercises. Focus your attention on being present, on bringing yourself back when you notice that you are drifting away, and experiencing yourself in this new way. After completing these activities journal about what this was like for you.

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PURPOSE:

Before doing the following exercises read the articles “For the Sake of What” by Richard Lieder and “Declarations” by Richard Stozzi-Heckler. Do one of the exercises each day.

1. Begin with the basic meditation. Then ask yourself, what is the truest statement I could write about myself right now? Using a paper and pencil that you have ready nearby, write whatever that statement is. Next, just sit with the statement and notice what thoughts or feelings arise. Don't get caught up in the thoughts or feelings just notice them come and go. Ask yourself, is there a statement that you could write that would be truer than the one you've written? If so what is it? Write it. If nothing comes, stay with what you've already written. Repeat the process with any new thoughts that come and then simply sit with the truth about yourself in this moment. Bring your attention back to your breath, and sit with the statements that come and any feelings they raise.
2. Begin with the basic meditation. Ask yourself the following questions and see what comes. Allow yourself to sit with the answers. What if it really doesn't matter what you do? What if all that really matters is how you do whatever you do? What would you do? How would you do it? Let whatever thoughts or feelings come and sit with them. When you're ready write down any of the thoughts that came that you'd like to reflect on later. Bring your attention back to your breathing. Focusing on the rising and falling of your body which with each breath. Just be with your breath for a few moments and the let this question come; what would I do if it weren't so risky? Again write down your responses and then return to your breathing for a few moments.
3. With a pen and paper nearby, sit comfortably, focus on your breath for a few moments and when ready complete the following statement: My purpose is to _____ in a way that _____ so that _____. Continue to right complete statements without judging what you are writing or needing the statements to be perfect. Just flow with what comes. When you can no longer come up with new statements put your pen down and just spend a few minutes with what you've written. You may want to come back to this exercise a number of times during a weeks time to see what arises as you work on what arises within you.

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4. Review your notes and reflections from your work on these exercises see what has the most meaning for you and feels like your personal truth. Begin working on a statement that underscores what you have found is your commitment to yourself and the world using the stem. I am a commitment to _____. Your statement should naturally evolve into a simple one that suggests what is most important to you and will be the foundation for the choices that you make in your life. If you remember, the commitment that I came up with this year for myself was To be fully present and to connect compassionately. This guides my practices, my choice of the work that I do, and how I want to be with other people. This will take some time and over time may change. Be patient and listen deeply to what arises within you.