



Managing Our Monkey Mind

Training our attention on the body – Week 2

As body-focused as our culture is, most of us probably spend a significantly greater amount of time in our heads (which makes me think of those toys that have enormous heads and tiny bodies.) It is so easy to slip into disconnecting from the body for all kinds of reasons: we might not like it very much, it might be uncomfortable, maybe it doesn't do what we want it to. Plus, it's not where we do all that thinking, ruminating and storytelling so central to navigating our lives.

But as much as we might dismiss our body, it's an important source of information: it functions as a sensory bridge to our experience, the obvious bridge to health and healing and, oddly enough, even a bridge to our mind. When we can't put words to what we are thinking and feeling, our body serves as the mirror. It's why we find ourselves clenching our jaw and grinding our teeth when we're stressed. It's why we feel soft and open when we're holding a baby and full of energy when we're happy.

What's more, this pathway from the mind to the body isn't a one-way street. The body/mind connection is a loop -- our mind also mirrors what the body is feeling. If we are anxious but deliberately slow our breathing down and breathe like a calm person breathes, then our mind will start to settle and think more clearly. If we feel dull and heavy but get up and get our heart pumping, then our mood will also lighten. And, bizarrely, if we feel sad and like we might start to cry, the body can even trick the brain into thinking we're happy if we arrange our lips in the shape of a smile! (There are limits to how far this trickery can take you though it's often far enough to help dry up tears a little faster if it's an inopportune time to cry.)

As Martha Graham, one of the most influential choreographers of all time points out, "The body says what words cannot." It has its own wisdom. It can tell us what we need to know about how we think and feel if we aren't listening ourselves. At one point in my life when I was in a toxic job it took my arms and legs going numb to get me to realize I needed to get out of that job, something my head wasn't willing to acknowledge. It was like my legs were saying they weren't willing to take me to work and my arms were saying they weren't willing to lift a finger.

Because of this loop our body is one an important tool for working with the suffering mind. When the mind feels un-grounded and anxious, the body can ground us. We can influence the mind through our body, which is why having a massage is so relaxing or being under a weighted blanket is so comforting or why petting a piece of furry fabric is still soothing even though it's not a real pet! It's why hearing the sound of lapping water can put us at ease. Bottom line: the body is worth paying attention to and using mindfully in our pursuit of calm, peace, joy and, frankly, being a fully integrated person.

The body is one of our best tools for working with the mind.

