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itness is an important part of our lives and of our well-being, both physical and mental, and many Westerners are reconsidering spiritual fitness. In most Eastern approaches to health, spiritual well-being is intimately connected to one's overall health at every level and to the world around us. As bodyworkers, we touch this truth daily—in our practices and through our relationships: to our own body, to those of our clients, to the community and environment. Our state of being is affected by and affects others. There is an undeniable interdependence.





# Caring for Body and Soul

Reconsidering Spiritual Well-Being

BY SONIA OSORIO

To consider fitness or health limited only to the body now seems an almost naïve notion as we come to understand and appreciate how overall health is intimately related to how well we care for a much deeper part of ourselves. This is being recognized more, as Western medicine acknowledges the links between emotional, physical, and psychological health. When we are fit and healthy, living in accordance with our deeper values, we face life and its challenges and lessons with enthusiasm. When we live in a way that's not in alignment with who we are and what we believe, our vital energy feels drained.

"To stay spiritually fit means living in truth and trust, being yourself at the deepest level in everything you do, bringing all of you to your life experiences," writes Caroline Reynolds, workshop facilitator and author of *Spiritual Fitness*. "When we trust, we start to make our choices and decisions from a place of love and courage, instead of from fear. This in turn gives us clarity and strength. [This] is not about doctrine. It is about honoring the basic human values that are truly the most important to every one of us: love, trust, joy [which offer] us the chance to make these values the cornerstones of our life experiences."<sup>1</sup>

There is at once great responsibility and great freedom in this point of view. It demands ongoing commitment to a process we may not intellectually understand, but that we can trust at much deeper levels: in our bodies and in our being. We notice that, as we let go of old patterns and points of view, different choices become available, and we can act more integrally with what we believe in. There is lightness and an openness in this that's very natural. We may be doing the same work, be in the same relationships, and live in

the same place, but there's a deeper change: a satisfaction, a joy, and an appreciation for all life. Or, we may need to make some significant changes in some areas. Regardless, we feel and trust our internal cues. We know what to do and have the confidence to do it—for ourselves and for others.

This place where body and mind, self and other converge is also where West meets East. Inherent in Eastern approaches is the notion that we are not separate from this world and are, in fact, in continuous relationship with it. This interconnection also defines current explorations in such multidisciplinary fields as psychoneuroimmunology and mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques. As these fields and philosophies begin to converge, therapists, bodyworkers, and anyone committed to a healing path can benefit from considering how we approach health and well-being—physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and even ecological—and how this relates to the wider social context and back to the individual.

### INTERDEPENDENCE

Eastern practitioners believe that an individual cannot experience life independent of the body or mind. Eastern teachings, particularly yoga and Buddhism, understand that the body and the mind are not inherently separate. In fact, in Sanskrit, the ancient language of yoga, there are no words that distinguish between the mind and the body. Just as our mind and body are not separate, we are not separate from what happens to us. When we work on—or more accurately *with* others—we work on ourselves, and indirectly, on the world around us.

"In many Eastern teachings, the mind is considered another sense organ," explained Michael Stone in a recent interview. He's a psychotherapist, yoga teacher, and longtime Buddhist practitioner in Toronto, Ontario. Stone, who leads workshops internationally,

collaborated recently with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, on the intersection of yoga, Buddhism, and psychotherapy. "There's no way of distinguishing that there's a mind relating to a body, or a body that's based in the mind, or a mind that's based in the body because we can only take in the world through our sense organs and the mind. This is a nice way of seeing the mind-body more as a process, rather than this thing called 'the mind' relating to this thing called 'the body.' We have to work with both because they are co-functioning processes—psychologically, physiologically, naturally."

This co-functioning, or interdependence, is something most bodyworkers understand fundamentally regardless of their spiritual practice. We know how important it is to live our truth since it is reflected in the quality of our presence and of our touch. Socially and through all of our family and work relationships, our body responds to and records all our interactions. Our structural, physical, and even immunological integrity is affected by how much we are living in integrity in our daily lives. This is actually a very simple yet profound notion, threaded through most Eastern approaches, but one that we sometimes forget—or perhaps make more mystical than need be.

"Interdependence only seems like a profound truth because we don't recognize it 99 percent of the time," writes Ethan Nichtern. Nichtern is founding director of the Interdependence Project, a nonprofit venture created to bring meditation principles to the arts, activism, and environmental initiatives.

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issues of global importance; it occurs on every level of our experience simultaneously, from the construction of our own personal identity all the way up to the ungraspable complexities of human society.”<sup>2</sup>

Our bodies understand balance and interdependence quite naturally. We always veer toward homeostasis—balance at all levels and in all systems—both inside and out. Eastern body-mind-spirit approaches have always cared for the physical body and the spiritual aspect of the individual, believing that the psychological and emotional aspects would then naturally come into balance, and that this very natural movement toward health would also naturally have an effect on the health of those around that individual. In this way, the responsibility for encouraging health and happiness naturally extends beyond the individual, and we enter into true relationship with all that’s around and within us.

“The one thing we don’t want to do is to ignore or rupture the essential connections that can complete relevant feedback loops and restore self-regulation and balance,” writes Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder and director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, which integrates techniques of mindfulness-based practices and mind-body research. “Our real challenge when we have symptoms is to see if we can listen to their messages and really hear them and take them to heart, that is, make the connection fully.”<sup>3</sup>

These feedback loops are not just about our internal processes; they also help remind us of our intimate connection to the world around us and how it affects us and how our actions affect others. “We believe that all relationships ... can be renewed by restoring the pathways to connection,” write Jean Baker Miller and Irene Pierce Stiver in *The Healing Connection*.<sup>4</sup>

These pathways can range from hands-on therapy, to guided visualization, to mindfulness-based practices, to simply listening deeply to our own bodies or remaining present to another’s experience. While we may, at first, do this with a focus on ourselves, it can eventually become a gateway that allows us to create genuine relationships and engage fully in life.



“As we move into authentic connections with the people in our lives, we will find more common ground with them, leading us toward an enlarged sense of community and of possibilities for social change,” Miller and Stiver explain. “Making connections has implications for the world, not only for our individual lives.”

“Psychological suffering occurs when we are cut-off from others and prevented from engaging in authentic, empathic, and empowering relationships,” Stone says. “Chronic disconnection results in depression, apathy, loss of energy, and disconnection from the complex web of relationships that give and sustain life. This is a psychological problem because at a physical and almost impersonal level, there is no way out of the inherent matrix of living relationship.”

#### AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

For many of us, the challenge is to be fully present in the body in this moment—not our ideas of our body, bodywork, or our role as bodyworkers or clients. And often, this is not always about what we may want to feel. How many of us can honestly say that we want to feel *everything* that arises, in ourselves or in our clients? It’s an ongoing—and humbling—process, but one that demands we cultivate presence and awareness. If we’re honest about the process, our capacity to hold all experience in awareness grows and it feels very natural—unimposed and unpretentious. We receive, we give, we experience.

“In both Buddhist psychology and Western experiential therapy, this process of experiencing and accepting the changing stream of sensations is central to the alchemy of transformation,” writes Tara Brach, PhD, a clinical psychologist and founder of the Insight Meditation Community in Washington, DC,

in her book *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. “Emotions, a combination of physical sensations and the stories we tell ourselves, continue to cause suffering until we experience them fully where they live in our body.”<sup>5</sup>

For many people, though, it’s difficult to stay with whatever emerges around an experience—particularly if it’s related to trauma or other deep emotional/physical holding patterns—because we’re conditioned to not be there. That’s why they’re holding patterns: because we haven’t actually fully entered them and so we can’t exit or relate to them directly. Even if we can recognize a pattern, it doesn’t presuppose we have the skills to let it go. This is where Western psychotherapeutic processes, bodywork, and Eastern approaches for working with the body-mind can complement one another. Once we know how to recognize a pattern, we can then develop the skills to observe it, feel it without reactive patterns, and release it completely.

By understanding different approaches, we can integrate them at different moments in someone’s process, working with what’s appropriate in the moment, as an experience unfolds. For people who do bodywork, this skill is in great demand: how to assist people in contacting the feeling/sensation level of their experience before analysis and language interfere, or even disrupt, the process of accessing and staying with these deep feeling states. That’s not to say that speaking does not help, but timing is everything. Usually while we’re in those places, words aren’t necessary though words may be important later to convey the experience; they aren’t essential to experiencing it.

We sometimes bypass, or over-analyze, or rush past this space. Then stories enter to fill the void, muscles and fascia contract, and breath becomes constricted around those beliefs—and no real shift can happen. Through touch, breath work, or mindfulness-based practices, we can help clients contact the sensations in their body before they create stories about them. Those deep-feeling states can then offer an opening for change to occur. We've fallen out of relationship to what's really happening. *Suffering* (to use a Buddhist term) or *struggle* arises when we resist, indulge in, or ignore these very natural movements as they unfold in our bodies and around us.

#### MINDFULLY RELATING

Brach speaks of bringing attention to the physical sensation of an emotion, noticing but not dwelling in the stories about it. Then we can be fully present to and relate to what's arising instead of our ideas of what's arising. This is the basis of mindfulness-based practices. As we do this, we notice that sensations, like emotions, have a limited life span—they come, they go, they change, they fluctuate—but they no longer define (or confine) us into ideas about who we or others are. Stories, however, tend to linger much longer and entrench themselves much deeper.

“Mindfulness is a term that comes from various contemplative traditions, including Buddhism and yoga,” writes Stone in his blog. “[It] begins by going very slowly and noticing how one is affected by and how one responds to experience. Within a therapeutic context, mindfulness practice is often called ‘assisted meditation.’ In therapy, its greatest effect is simply staying present with experience longer. When we stay a little longer with what we notice—an emotion, tension in the body, a belief—we gather more information so that we can study this material without interfering with it.”<sup>6</sup>

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We can't have a physical holding pattern without a psychological holding pattern and the reverse is also true. Most bodyworkers have experienced this: as soon as we contact deep sensations in the body, people will start talking, either to try to stay in or to develop a story about their experience or sensation, without fully feeling it. Our intention then is to rest with what's arising, to encourage a quietness and stillness that allows this resting. Our challenge, however, is to do this without being distracted by the stories we, or our clients, tell about what's happening.

When we practice staying with an experience, without the need to interpret or interfere, we can observe from a place where physical and emotional reactions don't pull us away from whatever is revealing itself. Our work is to bring awareness continually to these places and to encourage our capacity—and those of our clients—to hold those places

in awareness, to just be with what is: different bodily sensations, movements of thoughts, turbulent or pleasant emotions, patterns of tension or release. This involves both releasing into and trusting our experience.

When we fully enter into our own or another's experience, we realize there's not that much difference: the stories about and reactions to our pain or tension or joy may change, but we all experience these states. This realization is the great equalizer: we are all interconnected by our very ability to feel deeply. We are intimately in relationship with all that is around us and within us—and because of this, we need to continue the work that we do, to remain awake to all that presents itself. This takes both courage and trust, but in truth, we cannot do otherwise.

#### SERVING HEALTH

As we become more aware of the points where Eastern and Western approaches to health converge, we notice more similarities than differences in the various techniques, disciplines, and philosophies of the body-mind. But what about the areas where these approaches don't quite meet? Stone sees these places as fertile ground for change.

“As much as it's important to see how these traditions complement each other, it's also very exciting to see how they're different and don't quite work together,” he says. “Good science, like good spiritual practice, is about ongoing questioning. I'd say this to people who are coming out of any training program, whether as yoga teachers, bodyworkers, or psychologists: move past the paradigm that you've studied. Get back to that place where you can question things very deeply, so that when you're actually working with someone, you can let go of your paradigm and really listen, feel, and learn something.”

This notion of serving whatever arises is the definition of compassion: to simply be present and open to whatever arises. For Stone, it is also the very definition of health. “Health is the ability to serve anything other than our ideas of how things are,” he says. “It’s the ability to feel the reality of interdependence, to consistently feel a sense of intimacy with all things, with the natural world, with other sentient beings. So, where Western medicine defines health mainly by symptom relief, what’s so promising about the convergence of Western psychology, yoga, and Buddhism is a re-thinking of the goal of our healing modalities. When I hear my client or students feeling ‘better,’ what I hear is a sense that they belong, that life is meaningful ... Self-centeredness is often what we’re left with when we’re caught up in habit and addictions, when we exclude all else. When we come out of this shell of self-centeredness, we reconnect to others and regain health.”

Perhaps bodywork therapy and contemplative practices are not about doing any work per se, but about undoing—just allowing patterns of physical and emotional holding to unravel and fall away, so that a natural process can unfold, and we can live our lives instead of an idea about it. Then, we find openness and freedom—within emotions, sensations, or experiences. We connect fully to our experience and know what to do and how to do it with compassion and with great skill. Then we move toward health as an ongoing commitment. This is really the relationship we commit to: to being fully alive and awake, to honoring all life in the best way that we can.



“Relationship is not a project, it is a grace,” writes Thomas Moore in *Soul Mates*. “Relationship is not only about the people who interact with each other. It is a vehicle as well to the absolute factors that shape human life fundamentally.”<sup>7</sup>

In this very process, almost irrespective of technique, we become more honest and real. It is from this place that true healing and transformation happens. When we’re not trying to do anything—unattached to our roles as therapist or client, teacher or student, no longer trying to do anything or to be anyone—then we can deeply feel whatever arises in ourselves and others. Then we know how to respond: maybe as therapists or as clients, but more so as human beings. That, in itself, is a genuine movement toward health and well-being at all levels—incorporating, but not limited to or by, any approach, technique, or tradition. **m&b**

🕒 *Sonia Osorio is a certified massage therapist and yoga teacher with a background in natural healthcare, dance, and movement. Her interest is in discovering the places where various traditions and practices meet, finding ways to cultivate our inner resources, and expanding that energy into our lives and out to others. Contact her at [sonia@sensations.ca](mailto:sonia@sensations.ca).*

## NOTES

- 1 Carolyn Reynolds, excerpted with permission from [www.spiritual-fitness.com/pages/main.asp?section=spiritual&page=what\\_is](http://www.spiritual-fitness.com/pages/main.asp?section=spiritual&page=what_is). Accessed April 2008. Her text is *Spiritual Fitness: How to Live in Truth and Trust* (Los Angeles: DeVorss, 2005).
- 2 Ethan Nichtern, *One City: A Declaration of Interdependence* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2007), 9-10.
- 3 Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1990), 280.
- 4 Jean Baker Miller and Irene Pierce Stiver, *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 18.
- 5 Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003), 117.
- 6 Excerpted with permission from Michael Stone’s website [www.centreforgravity.org/psychotherapy.htm](http://www.centreforgravity.org/psychotherapy.htm). Accessed April 2008.
- 7 Thomas Moore, *Soul Mates* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 256-257.