

59

Energy and the Nervous System in Embodied Experience

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Since the late 1980s, explorations in Gestalt Body Process Psychotherapy (GBPP) (Kepner, 1987, 2012) have enhanced our appreciation of the importance of the nervous system to our embodied functioning and experience. These observations have emerged from a refinement of “energetic” techniques that have allowed us to work directly with the human nervous system, rather than through methods more common in Body Psychotherapy, whose effect on the nervous system is somewhat more physical or emotional, and thus more indirect. This chapter is a preliminary report on some of the concepts and principles that have emerged over the last quarter century.

These developments have had a significant impact on our facility, on our effectiveness, and on our use of body-oriented interventions, facilitating our work with the body and character structure, helping us to further connect cli-

ents to their embodied experience more rapidly, and allowing us to readily clear trauma responses from the nervous system. The results of this work have transformed the way that we understand what is meant by “embodiment” and also how we practice Body Psychotherapy.

The emphasis in this particular approach is on energy, consciousness, and the experience of embodiment, which may seem peculiar to those whose view of the nervous system is drawn only from biology. But this energetic framework integrates very well with our scientific view of the nervous system, while also helping to anchor us better in the phenomenology (direct experience) of ourselves as embodied beings. Real, felt, embodied *experience* is what lies at the core of our work in Body Psychotherapy. Energetic work with the nervous system gives us a selection of tools to deepen (subtly, but profoundly) our embodied experience while revealing important insights into the energetic aspects of the nature of consciousness itself—the marriage of soul and matter, which is the nature of our humanness.

Energy, Embodied Awareness, and the Nervous System

Body Psychotherapy has always had a connection with the energy of the body, deriving from our roots in Reichian theory, as the first truly body-oriented psychotherapy (besides Pierre Janet). Reich took on Freud’s theory of *libido energy* (very seriously), seeing it being bound up in neurotic processes, and he linked this to the binding of muscular tensions in various character structures. He observed that muscular armoring, as an intrinsic part of neurotic adaptation, reduces vitality, sensation, and feel-

ing, as well as the flow of emotion, and so on. On the other hand, release of muscular armoring reproduced in/stored up in/introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) brought about pulsatory movements and “streaming” sensations.

These are experienced subjectively as a flow of energy, and are experienced objectively as concomitant with such things as increased emotional release, warmth, vitality, and liveliness of tissue. Reich understood this as a functional unity between the bioenergetic process (libido, or what he later termed orgone energy), muscular armoring, and character defense structures. Although many Body Psychotherapies do not use notions of an energetic system in their own theory and understanding of embodiment, the concept of energy has a significant place in the deeper ground of our field.

More recently, in the field of the healing arts, hands-on approaches have evolved from the influence of Eastern systems, such as the chakra system of subtle energy, and the traditional Chinese medicine mapping of the flow of *chi* or subtle energy in the body. These energetic healing arts (see, for example: Krieger, 1979; Brennan, 1993; Bruyere, 1994; Brown, 1998) are based on the well-established practice of the “healer” either manipulating the recipient’s “subtle energy” (as in acupuncture) or directing “subtle energy” through their own body and hands into the body of the “recipient.” This is a skill that can be demonstrated and taught.

Although the actual nature of what “subtle energy” is is still quite puzzling, scientifically, there is considerable research that suggests that experienced healers appear to be emitting low-frequency electromagnetic fields from their hands, and thus influencing the electromagnetic and bio-plasmic fields in and around living tissue within the client’s body. There is now a wide array of research indicating that subtle energy work has definite and measurable effects on a variety of medical and psychological conditions, suggesting that it is much more than just a placebo effect, a form of hypnotic suggestion, or a “mystic phenomenon.”

Because it is not the purpose of this chapter to review and present the arguments about the reality of subtle energy

(which is nonetheless a definitive experiential phenomenon, even if arguably still a controversial one), readers are therefore referred to Hunt (1978, 1982), Becker (1992), Slater (1995), and Benor (2001) for discussion about some of the scientific and research issues in this field; and to Krieger (1979), Brennan (1987), Bruyere (1994), Fahrion (1995), and Brown (1998) for descriptions of various forms of practice. In this chapter, the term “energy” will be used synonymously with “subtle energy.”

Subtle energy appears to have certain characteristics of either *flow* (plasmic and waterlike qualities) and/or *field* (coherent and interpenetrating qualities) (see Figure 59.1). Skilled therapists can also affect the frequency, temperature, and tonality of subtle energy by using their practiced intention. The intensity (amplitude) of subtle energy, generated by a particular therapist, also tends to increase over time (with practice) and, generally speaking, the greater the amplitude of energy flow generated, the more effect there seems to be both on the recipient’s sensation and on creating actual changes in the recipient’s body tissue itself.

Subtle energy, in this sense, may be subtle—in effect—only because of the therapist’s lack of skill or experience; and, with practiced operators, it may not be felt as being subtle at all by the receiver. Another factor in the receiver being able to perceive a palpable effect is their degree of kinesthetic numbness to their own body’s sensations, which we will understand later in this chapter as being determined (to a large degree) by the blockage of their own nervous system to their flow of energy. The more numb and blocked a person is, the greater the intensity of energy flow that will be required for them in order to “feel something.” (Reich also found this with blocked or heavily “armored” patients.) Conversely, the more open they are to the flow of energy, the less intensity of flow will be required to create a palpable experience of energy.

As a student of these methods, I have integrated energetic practices into the hands-on work that we do as a part of GBPP (Kepner, 2000) because of its usefulness in fostering many of the aims of a body-oriented psychotherapy. This includes aims such as: increasing bodily sensation; supporting a sense of interconnection of one’s body parts;

CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALITIES OF SUBTLE ENERGY

CHARACTERISTICS

FLOW—Movement along pathways; “like water;” fills muscle, fascia & tissue; spreads down available routes, into available spaces; plasmic qualities

FIELD—Interpenetrates matter; not bounded by the physical; tends to cohere (form a unified whole, stick together) with itself

QUALITIES

FREQUENCY—color, vibration, pulsation

TEMPERATURE—warmth to coolness

TONALITY—has tonal qualities e.g. vital, charging, calming, soft, definitive, yin, yang, etc.

EFFECTS—effects both tissue and also subjective experience (embodiment)

Figure 59.1: Characteristics and qualities of subtle energy

the experience of internal flow; and greater access to embodied emotional experience. Energetic techniques also operate with a minimal degree of intrusiveness for the client. This can be an important factor, especially when working with traumatized clients (Kepner, 1995), especially in comparison to more muscle-oriented interventions, such as movement, expressive work, or deep massage, which are typical of many Body-Oriented Psychotherapeutic interventions.

As we have extended this energetic work to being able to direct particular application on, and within, the recipient’s nervous system itself, some principles have emerged pertaining to the relationship between energy, awareness, and embodiment. I will discuss these and then present some of our current observations on the phenomenology of different parts of the nervous system as they impact Body Psychotherapeutic work: Figure 59.2 summarizes these principles.

KEY PRINCIPLES FROM ENERGETIC WORK IN THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

- I. The nervous system is also an energetic system.
- II. Conscious awareness has energetic properties.
- III. Consciousness is embodied via the pathways of the nervous system.
- IV. Consciousness is embodied in the nervous system in a cephalo-caudal-peripheral direction.
- V. The availability of nervous system tissue to energy determines our capacity for, and experience of, embodiment.
- VI. Different parts of our nervous system engender different qualities or aspects of self-experience.

I. The Nervous System Is Also an Energetic System

In addition to all its physiological functions and the transmission of nerve impulses, the nervous system appears to also serve as a system for distributing energy to body tissues and organs. This is an understanding that has emerged from our exploration of the work of a twentieth-century energy healer named William Gray (Gray, 1947; Kepner, 2001; Montgomery, 1973).

Gray intuitively developed a strange but powerful system of healing, essentially by understanding the nervous system as a distribution network of subtle energy. Our “subtle energy” therapeutic work has evolved from trying to re-create some of Gray’s understanding. Nerves and the nervous system tissue appear to be able to readily distribute this form of subtle energy throughout the body and directly into body tissues.

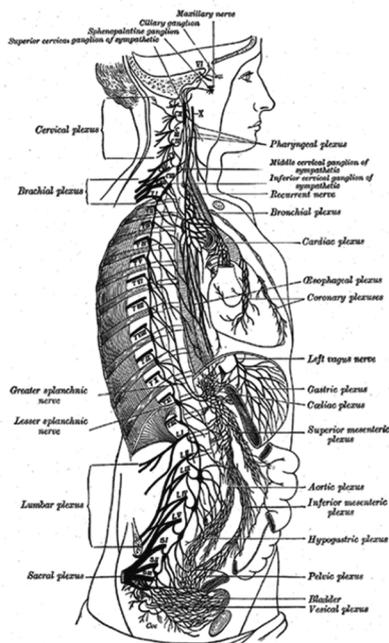


Figure 59.3. The autonomic nervous system (from Gray’s Anatomy, 1918)

The concept of the human nervous system as an energy-distribution system is certainly of interest to many energy practitioners and healers, and to those in the somatic therapies, but we are more interested in the impact on Body Psychotherapists.

As we have developed various techniques to “clear” and “open up” these nerves for a better energy flow according to this principle, we have also observed that this often made a major impact on the client’s sense of their own embodiment. They experienced themselves as more “in” their body, more physically aware, with increased bodily sensations, and with greater access to emotional feelings. These factors are essential to any Body Psychotherapeutic process and so were of considerable interest to us, especially because the energetic work with the nervous system produced these effects more readily, and with less fuss, than more vigorous physical techniques. In addition, working with the nervous system as an energetic system has allowed us to understand the crucial link between consciousness, energy, and the nervous system, and how this linkage profoundly affects our experience of our embodied self.

II. Conscious Awareness Has Energetic Properties

Practitioners who have been trained in and are sensitive to touch techniques readily note the difference in the “felt quality” of a person’s body tissue, particularly when that person brings their awareness *into* that body area—not just attends “from a distance,” but is able to feel “present” in that area. When awareness is present, body tissue feels more vibrant, warm, flowing, and alive. These qualities are almost identical to what other energy healers have observed in the “felt quality” of tissue that has been opened to energy.

Consciousness (conscious awareness) appears to have properties and qualities that are almost identical to those of subtle energy in general; therefore, we have concluded that it, too, is “energetic” in its nature. We term this energetic property of “conscious awareness” the *Energy of Awareness* (EOA). As with other energetic phenomena, a trained practitioner can sense this conscious awareness in terms of its “presence” or “absence” in the client’s body. The EOA behaves like other “energetic stuff” in having qualities of

flow and presence, as well as frequency and amplitude. Even relatively untrained hands can acquire some sense of this through the following exercise:

Exercise: Presence/Absence of Awareness in the Shoulder and Impact on the Toucher's Impressions

Find a partner to work with and have them stand in a relaxed and comfortable position. Stand at their side, facing them, so that you can easily place your hands on either side of one of their shoulders, cupping the shoulder joint with your palms, without reaching and without straining your own shoulders.

First, rub your hands briskly together to warm and sensitize them, then place your hands on their shoulder as described. Continue breathing fully throughout this exercise, rather than diminishing your breathing in order to “focus,” because constancy of breathing maintains better sensitivity. Your elbows should be bent and your own shoulders and arms should be relaxed so you don't strain.

Without changing their breathing and without moving in any way, instruct your partner to bring their attention

away from the shoulder you are touching, not just to ignore that part of them, but to actively draw their attention out of that place and to put all of their focus elsewhere, say, into their other shoulder. Notice how their shoulder feels between your hands as they do this for a minute or two.

Then instruct your partner to bring all of their attention *into* the shoulder you are touching, as if bringing themselves as fully as possible into the space between your hands. Again, pay attention to how their shoulder feels between your hands as they do this, noting any differences for a minute or two.

You might wish to ask them to repeat this sequence so that you can compare and contrast the subtle differences, and because your partner may become more skillful at moving their attention by repeating this a few times, giving you a more distinct difference to notice.

Most people can discern some palpable differences in the sense of vitality, a liveliness or presence, when you (or your partner) withdraw their awareness from their shoulder, compared to when they moved their awareness more fully into their shoulder. It is also this sense of awareness



Figure 59.4. The nervous system.

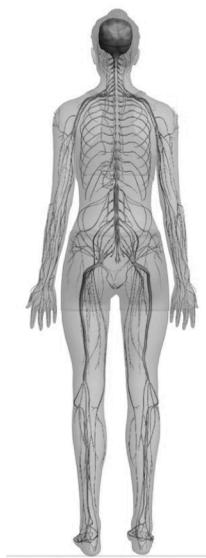


Figure 59.5. Nervous system flow.

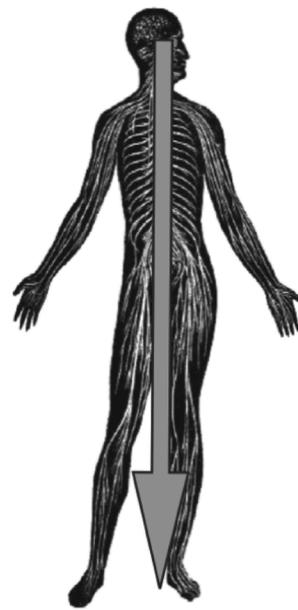


Figure 59.6. Embodiment via the nervous system.

moving in and *moving* out of body areas that further gives us the sense that awareness is something that is flowing and energetic in nature.

Consciousness is not like a light shining from a tall tower onto the bodily terrain below. Conscious awareness itself has an energetic quality and literally spreads and moves through mental awareness, as well as through body areas and tissues. Whereas the biological nervous system gives us a “signal” to and from the brain and nerve endings, which results in awareness of our body from that signal, it is the actual energy flow through the nervous system and the ability of our nervous system to carry the EOA that make for the possibility of *awareness in* our body. It is the EOA that gives us a direct felt sense of “being” spread into, and through, our body that we can truly call “embodiment” rather than experiencing ourselves as only perched in our head, observing our bodily experience from afar.

III. Consciousness Is Embodied via the Pathways of the Nervous System

Although most people would say that they are aware of their body, in the sense of being able to feel their bodily presence and location in a general way, if asked to point to where they live or to locate their “I,” they are quite likely to point to their head. For the most part, we experience the center of our conscious awareness as being in the body region of the head, with the rest of our body being experienced at a distance—so to speak, “down there.” It is not that we don’t have *literal* sensation or control over our body below the head, but that, as a rule, we don’t feel rooted “in and of” our body as a whole. Experientially, our “I,” our sense of consciousness, is not evenly spread into, embedded in, and living in our bodily being, and we don’t fully *inhabit* our bodily “being.” Being aware “of” one’s body is not the same as living *in* one’s body. We don’t fully *occupy* our bodily being. The “commonsense” view that a person is their mind and thinking is not a philosophical “mind/body” problem. It is our common experience that our sense of presence, our consciousness, and our EOA is embedded more in our brain and head than elsewhere in our body.

If you look at Figure 59.5, you can observe how the nervous system so beautifully connects all the body areas and parts to the brain and vice versa. You will recall how energy behaves like water in the sense that it flows and fills into tissues—similar to the flow of blood—and spreads, when it has an open channel through which to do so, and provides a carrier vehicle for other “substances,” like the EOA.

Imagine that the nervous system is like an open set of conduits or channels. Imagine pouring a stream of water from the brain “downward and outward” (in a cephalo-caudal-peripheral direction), filling all the channels of the nerves. Then picture a drop of blue dye centered in the brain, the particular energy quality of consciousness that we are calling the EOA, spreading downward and out into these watery channels until it filters all the way into the nerve endings and thus into the body tissues.

If the brain is the putative “seat of consciousness,” and if conscious awareness is an energetic phenomenon (the EOA), then we can see how the nervous system would be the ready pathway—the highway of light, so to speak—for the EOA to spread into the body.

IV. Consciousness Is Embodied in the Nervous System in a Cephalo-Caudal-Peripheral Direction

Consciousness is embodied via the pathways of the nervous system in a cephalo-caudal-peripheral (from the head, downward toward the tail, and then outward) direction. It becomes apparent from the description we are developing that the consciousness becomes embodied as the EOA enters into bodily life from the center of consciousness in the brain, via an energetically accessible nervous system in a downward direction (from the point of view of a standing figure). Just as the nervous system of the human embryo grows in a cephalo-caudal (head-to-tail) direction, *conscious awareness spreads into the body from the center of consciousness (in the brain) “downward” through the spinal cord and then “out” into the peripheral nerves, autonomic, sensory, and motoric, and thus into the body’s tissues.*

The nervous system is, in this view, the means by which our consciousness connects into matter. As we appreciate the cephalo-caudal-peripheral direction through which

awareness spreads throughout the nervous system, this helps us to understand why certain classical Body Psychotherapeutic interventions don't seem to last very long. Grounding is one example of this.

Many body-oriented psychotherapies (like Bioenergetics) do a lot of physical work with the client's legs in order to help them to become more "in their body" and to become connected to the ground, and to the supports of their self, and much more aware of their lower half. These body-oriented psychotherapeutic approaches often work via the muscular system, through stretching and creating tensions, then relaxing, and/or generating vibrations and sensations through vigorous movement.

But, if the nervous system is the main means by which awareness connects downward into the body core and, once there, to the limbs, then the "grounding work" through the muscular system might not be the best approach. Although muscular work certainly creates an energetic charge and sensation in the areas being stimulated, thus creating more temporary signals for the whole biological nervous system, such muscular work may not open the nerves adequately to the resulting energy flow. And, more fundamentally, this may be working in the wrong direction in terms of how consciousness connects into embodiment: from the bottom up instead of from the head down.

Imagine the nervous system being like waxed cloth, such that the cloth can't absorb the "water" of awareness, centered in the brain. If you remove the wax in the leg end of the cloth, it still can't absorb the water from above, because the rest of the cloth is unable to absorb and draw down the Energy of Awareness toward the legs. Muscular work may make muscles more available to energy, but may not sufficiently clear the nerve flow in the legs, making the effects of grounding work dissipate too readily, despite hours of exercise and expressive work. You could wet the cloth, so to speak, by generating energy in the muscles through exercises, breathing, and movement, and the EOA will be carried on the general field of energy that is then present and covering more of the body. But, after you stop, the cloth will dry out again. As the muscularly generated field dissipates again, as it will without the coherency and

interconnection provided by the EOA throughout the nervous system, the person would feel himself or herself disconnecting from their legs again. The circuit of awareness is not completed from the inside out, via the natural carrier of the EOA, the energetic nervous system.

In addition, for some clients, all that stimulation and charge generated in their lower body can actually "chase out" their awareness from the nerves in their lower body, because it is fairly overwhelming and so the "ego" retreats from it. This is particularly true for survivors of trauma or abuse: there is an energetic withdrawal inward, more to their core.

Grounding is more rapidly facilitated and is actually longer lasting by energetically clearing out the nervous system, especially the big nerves in the legs, and making it more accessible to the EOA coming from the "head-down" direction.

V. The Availability of Nervous System Tissue to Energy Determines Our Capacity for, and Experience of, Embodiment

The relative availability of our nervous system tissue to energy largely determines our capacity for, and experience of, embodiment. It is obvious to anyone who works with bodily experience that, whereas everyone is aware of their body to a greater or lesser degree, many people do not prove to be *embodied* in the sense of feeling truly *in* their body. Some parts of us feel more "distant" from our sense of "self"; some parts of us we barely feel at all, let alone feel "present" in. Put in the terms of this chapter, our EOA is often not spread evenly throughout our nervous system and into our body tissues.

When our nervous system tissue is readily available to energy flow, we experience ourselves as more connected to, and truly able to occupy, our physical being. Conversely, when our nervous system tissue is limited in energy flow, we experience our bodily life more at a distance and indirectly, or hardly at all. One observation from the Body-Oriented Psychotherapies—that we are commonly less aware of, and less "in," some parts of our "bodily being" than others—is a function of just this availability of our

tissue to energy and awareness. Just as muscular tension can block the flow of energy and emotions in the body (as Reich observed), so too can nervous tissue become blocked and less permeable to the flow of energy and thus also to (the flow of the energy of) awareness.

The “waxed cloth” metaphor (used in the previous section) appears at times to be all too accurate a description for our nervous system: impervious to the watery flow of lived-in awareness. As we have worked in the nervous system energetically, it has become apparent for many of our clients, and for ourselves as well, that (1) their nervous system is not particularly open or available to energy flow, and (2) their EOA literally *can't* get into their body in any deep way.

It is not necessarily that they are resistant or defensive to bodily awareness, so much as they are stuck in their brain and, as the punch line of an old joke goes, “They can't get there from here.” A process that may have originated for defensive purposes may result in the nervous system being unavailable to the EOA, even when the client is willing and ready to release the defensive function.

As we connect to body areas that were vacated for defensive purposes, we must learn to distinguish defensive avoidance from the incapacity to experience. Therapists are often too ready to attribute ongoing incapacity to defensiveness, blaming the client for their inability or for their lack of “readiness.” It is as if, would they only be less defensive, they would be able to feel, or sense, or express emotion. The two may exist concurrently, and the client will tend to experience defensive avoidance only when their incapacity to experience their bodily nature via the nervous system exists.

VI. Different Parts of Our Nervous System Engender Different Qualities or Aspects of Self-Experience

Different parts of our nervous system engender different qualities or different aspects of self-experience, and our degree of consciousness in these parts of our nervous system (mediated by the energetic availability of these parts of our nervous system) affects our psychological functioning and sense of self. So far, we have spoken only of the *general*

availability of the nervous system to the EOA and to our general sense of being embodied.

Body-Oriented Psychotherapists have long noted that the specific location of a person's awareness, and the degree to which it occupies their body, has a significant impact on their psychological functioning. For example, as a way to cope with physical or sexual trauma, a person may withdraw their awareness from specific traumatized body areas, which may result in being unable to make that area function as fully available in their lives. Feeling numb and disconnected from the pelvis and sexual organs, as a result of sexual trauma, or feeling less present in body areas associated with surgery or disease, are just two examples of this mode of coping.

The obverse can also occur where some particular dimensions of embodiment are emphasized, to the exclusion of others, making this dimension of self-experience and contact predominant. We see this in character adaptations—for example, where a person's neuromuscular dimension of embodiment is the most energetically available part of them, predisposing them to relating to the world through *activity*, but leaving them relatively unaware of their visceral inner sensations and therefore relatively cut off from their emotional life. Someone who is “all action and no sense” may seek high-intensity and dangerous situations in order “just to feel” or “just to have an experience!” as one man put it to me in the course of therapy.

Our experience through each of our different body systems creates important nuances that somatically anchor us to different aspects of the self: our experience of having a solid place to stand in the world is mediated through our experience of our legs; our feelings and emotions are felt as resonant in our visceral organs; our feeling of our “depths” and “insides” is intrinsically connected to our capacity to sense our organs, bones, and muscles. We will have a clear sense of being “in” that part of us, and we will have access to the self-experience of that part of us, if that part of our nervous system is available to, and occupied by, our EOA. This is true even with the autonomic nervous system, even though we have regularly been told (by our scientific educationists) that we cannot be consciously aware of this system.

CONTINUUM OF EMBODIED AWARENESS

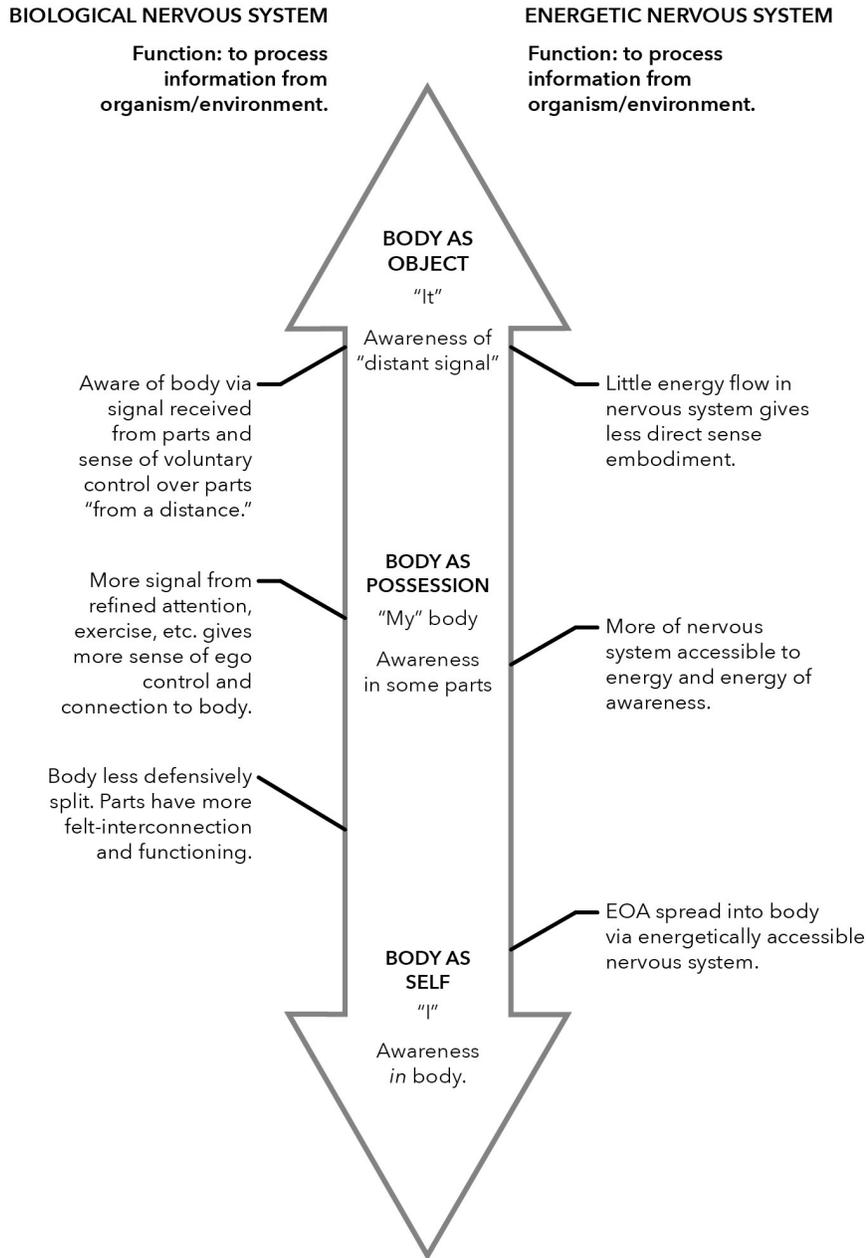


Figure 59.7: Embodiment and the nervous system.

Although the *functions* of our autonomic nervous system are not governed by aware cognition, in our work we have found we can have a surprisingly detailed awareness of our autonomic organs when the EOA has access to them by way of the autonomic nerves.

By opening the nervous system to the flow of energy, we gain access to awareness of our bodily life and we find new resources for experience, claim self-capacities, and bring our aware self into contact with issues in need of resolution. By bringing the EOA into our bodily life through an available nervous system, we come to live in the world and in ourselves more fully, making the pathway for our soul to manifest into a fully “lived” life.

The table in Figure 59.8 summarizes the two natures of our nervous system, and shows their contribution to the issue of embodied awareness and ownership of embodied life.

The Phenomenology of the Embodied Self and the Nervous System

As we have noted, different parts of our nervous system engender different qualities or aspects of self-experience, and our degree of consciousness in these parts of our nervous system (mediated by the energetic availability of each part of our nervous system) affects our psychological functioning and sense of self. We could broadly term this the “phenomenology of the embodied self through the nervous system.” In this, both the biological and energetic aspects of the different parts of our nervous system integrate into embodied qualities of experience.

The Experience of “Basic Being”: The Brain and Existence: The Brain and Feeling Located

From a Body Psychotherapist’s point of view, the primary experience of being an embodied self is like those three things said to be needed to sell any real estate: it is very much about location, location, location. To exist is to have a sense of location inside a body. To “incarnate” derives from the Latin *in carne* (“to be flesh”). Our first sense of being located in a body derives from our sense of being inside our skull looking out. From the view of this chapter, our

BRAIN

Basic being

SPINAL CORD AND MAJOR MUSCULO-SENSORY NERVES

Being in the world

MUSCULAR NERVES

Self as activity

External focus

AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Having insides

Internal feeling focus

VAGUS NERVE

Inner presence and substance

PELVIC PARASYMPATHETIC NERVES

Earthy, primal self

SYMPATHETIC NERVES

Sense of inner charge and excitement

Self as centered in body core

Figure 59.8. Experience of embodiment through the nervous system

sense of being located in the head comes from the way in which nerve tissue carries the EOA. Because the brain is the biggest mass of nervous tissue, it acts as a kind of big reservoir for consciousness and the EOA. It is this sense of presence, derived from the concentration of consciousness in the brain, that gives us the very fundamental grounding experience of “I am.” Descartes’ famous phrase could be phenomenologically restated as “*I feel my sense of location in my head, where I think that I think, and therefore I am.*” Had Descartes been more embodied, I daresay that the course of Western philosophy might have been different!

This brain-location sense of our fundamental being is usually so key to the very nature of human existence that it is infrequent for clients to lack even this much sense of their fundamental existence. One exception is some dissociative clients who may at times withdraw their EOA so completely (in order to flee embodied life) that they experience being located outside of their body. To be so

dislocated clinically suggests early, pre-verbal childhood trauma and shock, or perhaps prenatal problems that significantly disturbed the very process of fusing consciousness to matter in the developing nervous system.

The Experience of “Being in the World”: Filling Down into the Spinal Cord and Major Sensory-Motor Nerves

Our experience of *basic beingness* is followed by our movement into embodied life as the EOA extends “down” into the spinal cord from the brain (in the cephalo-caudal direction referred to earlier). The best nerve pathways for energy are through the bigger nerves of the body⁶⁰ and those that flow most directly to the seat of conscious awareness in the brain. These nerves include the spinal cord, the brachial nerves stemming from the cervical spinal cord, the large somatic nerves of the back, and the sciatic nerves of the legs. As we “fill into ourselves,” we establish a sense of our outline and a sense of being “present” in a bodily form. That is to say, as we have a sense of our back, arms, legs, and basic skin container via these major nerve pathways for energy and awareness, we also have the experience of being in the world as a bodily being. As the “fullness” of energy and EOA increases, we carry a greater sense of presence in our sense of being here on earth, as an embodied being.

This process of acquiring “fullness” can be done momentarily, as in an exercise or a workshop, but takes regular practice over time to become more constant and sustainable.

The Experience of Our “Insides”: The Autonomic Nervous System and a Core Self

The sense of our being in the world—which comes from the basic spinal cord, sensory, and muscular nerves—could be described as our experience of our bodily self as agent and container; but as embodied beings we are both container

60 It appears that literal nervous tissue volume has something to do with how much energy can be carried through the nervous tissue. Larger nerves tend to carry more energy and awareness, and also tend to open first to flow as we clear the nervous system.

and contents, a phrase used by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (1993). Our experience of having contents or insides comes from our autonomic nervous system, the combination of parasympathetic and sympathetic nerves that enervate our internal organs. Most of us have been taught (in biology and physiology) that this part of our nervous system, in both sensory and motor forms, is completely unaware and is not accessible to conscious awareness or control. Medical doctors have even told me that we have awareness of internal-organ sensation only under conditions of disease, such as gastric pain or indigestion! But even on the biological level, nerve signals from our internal organs are registered by our brain, and certainly visceral sensations such as fullness, hunger, arousal, fear (via increased heart rate, respiration, and so on), and others are commonly perceived autonomic sensations.

As the autonomic nervous system is made more accessible to energy, our sense of “having insides” becomes even more clear and pronounced. We also have greater access to our inner life, our inner emotions, our gut feelings, and a textured response to our living, which comes from registering this dimension of our embodied being. Psychotherapy patients who present symptoms such as “I am empty inside” frequently turn out to be energetically blocked to significant parts of their autonomic nervous system and so register a blank spot in their bodily field of awareness, which they interpret as “empty.”

On more careful exploration of their body senses, this actually turns out to be a lack of sensation, like an area of the mouth numbed by dental anesthetics, so that these people are simply unable to *feel* their insides. In our current view, this is because they don’t have access to their autonomic nervous system via an available energetic connection.

An open energy flow from our central nervous system into the autonomic nerves creates a clearer sense of *having insides*: registering our inner sensations and processes. As our EOA spreads into the nerves of our autonomic nervous system, we shift from the experience of *having* insides to *being* inside, and begin to feel that we are *living from the inside out*. We have a sense of our core, our depths, in a way

that is not just metaphorical as these terms are often used in psychotherapy, but real in a physical sense. Our “depths” are literally our nerves and organs deep in our body core. “Deep inside me” is the feeling of sensation and consciousness embedded in one’s autonomic nervous system. “My core” is the feeling of being anchored in the literal location of the central axis of the torso through the sympathetic nervous system.

The most direct neural routes for the EOA, from the brain into the body core (torso) and the visceral organs, are through the nerves of the autonomic nervous system, especially the sympathetic ganglion chain and the vagus nerve. The sympathetic chain, which descends on either side of the spine inside the body cavity, and the vagus nerve, which descends from the brainstem and branches into the heart, lungs, and midabdominal digestive organs, both have direct cranial connections to the brain. It is from the quality of energy and awareness through these nerves, as well as the less conscious sensory nerve signals, that we have a sense of our insides, our inner gut feelings, and our visceral sense of experience.

Sensory nerve signals alone may give us some vague form of inner visceral sensation, but it is not sufficient to give us a sense of being inside ourselves, rooted in our inner presence and substance. Only when the EOA is connected to, and spread down into, our visceral organs via the autonomic nervous system does this sense of inner presence and substance become tangible and specific. When the EOA is *not* connected to and spread into our autonomic visceral nerves, we may feel autonomic stimulation and emotions, but they are experienced as coming from “down there” rather than “inside *me*.” We experience our feelings and emotions as “rising from below” without a clear connection to our own ongoing processes. For example, in panic and anxiety disorders, the person feels himself or herself as being taken over by a wave of anxiety—rising up from the solar plexus or chest—that occurs “from nowhere.” As we open the nerve pathways to energy flow, and thus create access for the EOA, clients experience a greater sense of their insides, and find more connection to their emotions and their inner life.

The “Vagal Experience”: Parasympathetic Nervous System Experience

The vagus nerve, really a nerve system in some ways, is one of the longest nerves in the body with direct cranial connections. It originates in the midbrain and descends down the interior of the torso all the way to the umbilical area, with branches to the eyelids, middle ear, salivary glands, heart, bronchial tubes, stomach, liver, pancreas, and parts of the large and small intestines. It covers a tremendous amount of our body interior.

The experience of being energetically present and connected to the vagus nerve is that of having inner presence and substance. We feel a sense of being filled into ourselves, of having inner substance. It tends to be a softer-edged quality than our sense of connection to our sympathetic nerves. Much of our vagal experience of self is related to the sensations and processes of feeding and ingesting food: an open and receptive quality of experience in the eyes and mouth; a sense of moving down and into one’s soft body core; a suffusing warmth in the chest that comes with slowing cardiac activity and bronchial dilation; and the sensations of interior satisfaction and fullness that come from the esophageal and intestinal presence. A lot of what (in psychotherapy) is referred to as “oral” is more properly “vagal” in nature.

Contact with yearning, longing, heartfelt wounds, difficulty with self-comforting and self-soothing, difficulty with love and relatedness, lack of an internal sense of sufficiency, and so on, are often related to energetic blockage and lack of presence in parts of the vagal system.

Lower Parasympathetic Experience

The lower parasympathetic nerves, which emerge from the sacrum, enervate the lower digestive and pelvic organs. Our internal experience through these nerves is not as specific as that arising from the vagus nerve, whose major organs—the heart, lungs, upper digestive tract, and transverse colon—seem to give us more definite and distinctive qualities of experience. We might best describe the registry of our lower parasympathetic nervous system experienc-

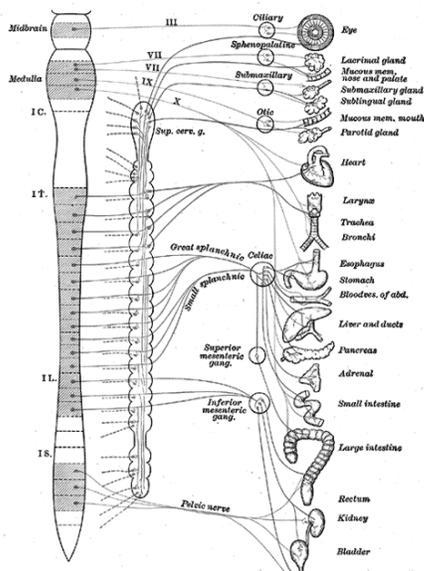


Figure 59.9. Diagram of autonomic nervous system (from Gray's Anatomy).

ing presence of, and in, our “earthy” self, because of the connection to sexuality and digestion. Another quality is a sense of our “depths.” The sense of having a deep, inner well of feeling comes from being connected to and living from (the EOA spread into) our lower parasympathetic nervous system.

The Experience of the Sympathetic Nervous System

Physiologically, the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is responsible for arousal states, and for preparing us for high-output activity, the so-called “fight-or-flight” reaction. This involves increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, increased respiration, a decrease in peristalsis and digestive activity (to free metabolic energy for the brain and muscles), a massive increase in adrenaline, an increase in cortisol and other secretions,

and many other changes in the metabolism.⁶¹ Phenomenologically, this creates a general internal sense of charge and excitement, a feeling of being energized and actively engaged or a feeling of readiness for engagement. It can also be experienced as great fear: but not so great a fear that paralyzes one (that is a third sympathetic variant, “fright”).

Our energetic experience of being in our sympathetic nervous system is, in part, related to this physiological sense of arousal, but is also related to the anatomical structure and location of one of its primary components: the sympathetic ganglion chain. The sympathetic ganglion chain descends all the way from the upper cervical vertebrae bilaterally on either side of the spine, but anterior to it, just inside the body cavity, from the spine all the way to the sacrum. Thus, it defines a kind of internal axis just in front of the spine, on the interior of the body. Nerve roots at each vertebral level connect from the spinal cord to the various ganglions.

Please recall that our main route of incarnation or inhabitation into embodiment is first from our brain downward into our spinal cord. When we energetically inhabit our spinal cord, and our sympathetic ganglion chain, we begin to have a very clear sense of being centered in ourselves and aligned with our axis. This sense of our axis is tremendously stabilizing to our personality, and we can feel much more able to hold our personal ground, unswayed, when we have this sense. A lot of issues that psychotherapists in our era have framed as being about “boundaries” are not really about how we manage interaction at our edges at all, but rather are about how we feel displaced from this central axis in our body. If we are not adequately anchored in our sympathetic/spinal axis through these parts of our nervous system, we can easily “lose ourselves” and center upon the experience or agenda of others.

As energy can spread into the sympathetic nerves that connect from the ganglions to the various organs, we have

61 Overall, an increase in sympathetic nervous system activity tends to decrease parasympathetic activity, although in some areas both of these are required, as in sexual arousal, during which increased heart rate and peripheral vasodilation (for erection and genital swelling) co-occur.

a sense of organ tone and internal support. The quality of “charge” that is characteristic of sympathetic nervous system energy carries a felt quality of being “pumped up.” We feel filled out inside, not just with a sense of internal presence (as occurs from the connection of our parasympathetic nerves to the organs) but with a sense of being somewhat expanded, internally defined, and toned.

The Experience of “Self as Activity”: The Neuromuscular Connection

When the Energy of Awareness (EOA) is engaged in the musculoskeletal nerves, the sense of one’s self as a definitive and bounded being, as well as of one’s self as being about activity, becomes paramount. The sensory signal generated by our muscle tone, when our muscle tone is adequate, leaves us with a sense of having a definite boundary—an elastic “shell,” so to speak—that has vibrancy and strength. If you have lifted weights at all, this sense of “I am” that comes from charged and toned musculature is quite familiar. Our sense of personal capacity and strength, which importantly relates to the feeling of our coping capacity, comes, in part, from our muscular and movement capacity and especially from the neurosensory feedback that we derive from an active, charged musculature.

In addition to feedback and self-definition, the quality of energetic emphasis on our “muscular” being also affects our focus. To have a more open energetic pathway out into our muscles—our periphery—is to focus more of our consciousness outward into our activities and into the world, so to speak. How much we live in our shell, our action in the world versus our action in other dimensions of our being, is an important contribution to character style and can be worked with from the energetic–nervous system direction.

For example, in the autonomy structure,⁶² the emphasis on guarding against manipulation by engaging the social world defensively through high-output actions or charm

radiating outward from the body directs all the energy of the personality toward the outer world.

The inner world, here understood as the autonomic nervous system and the body core, does not get accessed by awareness and is not “lived in” or inhabited by the EOA. Body therapeutic work that attempts to work through the musculature in this character structure usually reinforces this defense by mobilizing more energy output to this body “shell.” It does little to connect safely with and make accessible their inner being, which in essence is their autonomic nervous system, particularly the parasympathetic realm of experience that they are so defended against. Energetic work on the autonomic nervous system goes more directly to the heart of the matter for this kind of character structure.

In contrast, the need (oral) structure has the opposite problem. This structure must develop stronger energy and conscious connection to their muscular capacity and shell. Without this, they feel weak, impotent, unbounded, and unable to mobilize energy and self-support. Muscular development alone does not make for a continuity of energy consciousness through the nervous system. Working energetically at the boundary between nerve endings and muscles helps people with this character structure acquire a more stable and lively connection to their muscular, and thus more proactive, nature.

Reformulation of the Process of Body-Oriented Psychotherapy

Body Psychotherapists have worked to develop clients’ bodily awareness through physical means (touch-based work, movement, exercises, breathing, etc.) and often understand these as a way of working with a defense or adaptation. These techniques are predominantly muscular in nature, seeking to release defensively held tensions and emotional patterns, or seeking to flood the body systems with an energetic charge via breathing, the use of movement and touch, and so on. The effect on the nervous system is usually indirect and secondary. Under the terms of the current discussion, it appears that until the nervous

62 This term “autonomy structure” is derived from Bodydynamics. The equivalent term used in Reichian theory is the psychopathic character structure.

system is accessible to energy, and to the EOA, the person *can't* readily be “in” their bodily self. It is not resistance, so much as an inability. The muscular system *per se* seems to be an indirect means to accomplish this.

From the view presented here, much of the emphasis in Body-Oriented Psychotherapy on dissolving armor and working muscularly appears to be working from the wrong end of the system of human awareness. Our historical theory base, which has oriented more from our muscular nature, has predisposed us to certain kinds of interventions. These may have misled us as to the critical system through which our work operates.

Therapeutic aims that have appeared to require large movements, dramatic discharge, and high-amplitude breathing might be accessed with more subtle interventions if the awareness function can be accessed through its native energetic body system. The therapeutic work referred to here is, in my experience, equally deep as such high-amplitude discharge work, even though it may not have the dramatic quality that some have confused with authenticity. Also, it avoids the “collateral damage” that can come from excessive reenactment, regression, flooding of traumatized systems, retraumatization and imprinting, and so on—the iatrogenic problems inherent in certain forms of body therapeutic work.

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