

Energy & The Nervous System in Embodied Experience

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In the past five years explorations in GBPP (Kepner 1987) 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 in the nervous system rather than through methods more common in body oriented psychotherapy whose effect on the nervous system is more indirect. This paper is a preliminary report on some of the concepts and principles, which have emerged.

These developments have had a significant impact on our facility, effectiveness and use of body oriented interventions facilitating our work with body and character structure, helping us to more rapidly and connect clients to their embodied experience, and allowing us to readily clear trauma responses from the nervous system. The results of this work have transformed the way we understand embodiment and how we practice body-oriented psychotherapy.

The emphasis in this approach on energy, consciousness and the experience of embodiment may seem peculiar to those whose view of the nervous system is drawn only from a biological view. But the energetic framework integrates well with our scientific view of the nervous system while also helping to better anchor us in the phenomenology of ourselves as embodied beings. Real, felt, embodied *experience* is what lies at the core of our work in body oriented psychotherapy. Energetic work with the nervous system gives us the tools to subtly but profoundly deepen 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 our humanness.

Energy, embodied awareness and the nervous system.

Body oriented psychotherapy has always had an interest in body energy, deriving from our roots in Reichian theory as the first true body based psychotherapy. Reich, taking seriously Freud's theory of *libido energy* being bound in neurotic process, linked this to the binding of muscular tension in character structure. He observed that muscular armoring, as an intrinsic part of neurotic adaptation, reduced vitality, sensation and feeling, the flow of emotion and so on. On the other hand, release of muscular armoring

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brought about pulsatory movement and streaming sensations which subjectively are experienced as a flow of energy, and objectively are concomitant with such things as increased emotional release, warmth, vitality, and liveliness of tissue. He understood this as a functional unity between bio-energetic process (libido or what he later termed orgone energy), muscular armoring, and character defense. Although many body oriented psychotherapy's do not use energetic notions in their own theory and understanding of embodiment, the concept of energy has a 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 Chinese medicine mapping the flow of *chi* or subtle energy in the body. These energetic healing arts (see for example Bruyere 1994, Brennan 1993, Brown 1998, Krieger 1979) are based on the practice of the healer directing "subtle energy" through their own body into that of the client in specific ways to influence the clients energetic, emotional and physical functioning. I use the term in quotes here because in a purely scientific sense, we don't really know what the nature of this process is yet, or whether it meets the criteria for scientific usage of the term. Whatever "subtle energy" is in a scientific sense, its use in practice creates a palpable sense of flow, connection, awareness, warmth and presence for the receiver. It is also a skill, which can be demonstrated and taught.

Chart: Subtle Energy Characteristics

Flow- movement along pathways; "like water." Fills space & tissue. Spreads into available routes. Plasmic qualities.

Field- Interpenetrates matter; not bounded by physical. Tends to cohere 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 tissue

Effects subjective experience.

Although the nature of what subtle energy is scientifically is still puzzling, research has suggested that experienced healers appear to be emitting low frequency electromagnetic fields from their hands and influencing electromagnetic and bioplasmic fields in and around living tissue. There is now a wide array of research indicating that subtle energy work has definite effects on a variety of medical and psychological conditions, suggesting that it is more than placebo effect. Since it is not the purpose of this paper to review and argue for the reality of subtle energy, which is nonetheless a definitive experiential phenomenon even if arguably a controversial one in the scientific sense, readers are referred to Becker (1992), Benor (2001), Hunt (1978, 1982) and Slater (1995) for discussion of some of the scientific and research issues in this field, and Brennan (1987), Brown (1998), Bruyere (1994), Krieger (1979), Fabrion (1995) for descriptions of various forms of practice. In this paper, the term "energy" will be used as synonymous with "subtle energy" and is intended to refer to these characteristics.

Subtle energy appears to have characteristics (see chart) of either flow, or plasmic and water-like qualities, and *field*, or coherent and interpenetrating qualities. Skilled therapists can also effect the frequency, temperature and tonality of subtle energy by

practiced intention. The intensity (amplitude) of subtle energy generated by a particular therapist 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 receivers sensation and on creating actual changes in tissue itself. Subtle energy, in this sense, is subtle in effect only because of the therapists lack of skill or experience, and in practiced operators it may not be felt as subtle at all by the receiver. Another factor in perceiving a palpable effect for the receiver is their degree of kinesthetic numbness to their own body sensation, which we will later in this paper understand as determined to a large degree by the blockage of their own nervous system to energy flow. The more numb and blocked a person is, the greater the intensity of energy flow will be required for them to “feel something.” Contrawise, 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 energy practices into the hands-on work 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 body sensation, supporting a sense of interconnection of ones body parts, the experience of internal flow, and greater access to embodied emotional experience. Energy techniques also operate with minimal intrusiveness for the client. This can be an important factor in working with traumatized clients in comparison to more muscle-oriented interventions, such as movement, expressive work or deep massage, typical of body oriented psychotherapy interventions. As we have extended this energetic work to being able to direct application on, and within, the 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 oriented psychotherapy work. A chart at right summarizes these principles.

I. The nervous system is also an energetic system.

In addition to its physiological function, the transmission of nerve impulse, the nervous system appears also to 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 20th century energy healer named William Gray² (Gray 1947, Kepner 2001, Montgomery 1973). Nerves and nervous system tissue appear to readily distribute subtle energy throughout the body and directly into body tissues.

The concept of the human nervous system as a distributing system for energy in of itself is certainly of interest to energy practitioners and healers, and those in the and somatic therapies, but what does it have to say to body oriented psychotherapists? As we have developed techniques to clear and open nerves for better energy flow according to this principle, we also observed that this often made a major impact on client's sense of embodiment. They experienced themselves as more "in" their body, more physically aware, with increased body sensation and access to emotional feeling. These factors are essential to any body oriented psychotherapy and so were of note to us, especially since 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 effects our experience of our embodied self.

Chart: 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 pathway of the nervous system.
- IV. Consciousness is embodied via 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 effecting our psychological functioning and experience.

² William Gray, given the pseudonym "Mr. A" in Montgomery's book, intuitively developed an odd but powerful system of healing by understanding the nervous system as a distributing network of subtle energy. Our work has evolved from trying to recreate his work.

II. Conscious awareness has energetic properties (the energy of awareness).

Practitioners with trained and sensitive touch readily note the difference in the felt-quality of a person's bodily tissue when that person brings their awareness *into* that bodily area—not just attends “from a distance” but is able to feel present in that area. When awareness is present, bodily tissue feels more vibrant, warm, flowing and alive. These qualities are identical to what energy healers observe in the felt-quality of tissue that has been opened to energy, that it feels more vibrant, warm, flowing and alive.

Consciousness” i.e. the property of conscious awareness, appears to have properties and qualities which are identical to those of subtle energy in general, and we have concluded that it, too, is energetic in nature. We term this energetic property of conscious awareness the *energy of awareness (EOA)*. Like other energetic phenomenon, a trained practitioner can sense awareness in terms of its presence or absence in the body. The energy of awareness behaves like other “energetic stuff” in having qualities of flow and presence, frequency and amplitude.

Exercise: presence/absence in the shoulder and impact on toucher's impression. Some glimpse of this can be acquired even to relatively untrained hands through the following exercise. 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 could easily place your hands on either side of their shoulder, cupping the joint with your palms, without reaching or straining your own shoulders.

Rub your hands briskly together to warm and sensitize them, then place your hands on their shoulder as described. Stay breathing fully throughout this exercise, rather than diminish your breathing in order to “focus,” because constancy of breathing maintains better sensitivity. Your elbows should be bent and your own shoulders and arms relaxed so you are without strain.

Instruct your partner, without changing their breathing or moving in any way, to bring their attention *away* from the shoulder you are touching: not just ignore that part of them, but to actively draw their attention out of that place and 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 to compare and contrast the subtle differences, and because your partner may become more skillful at moving their attention from repeating this a few times, giving you a more distinct difference to notice.

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

awareness *moving* in and out of body areas which further gives us the sense that awareness is something 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 into body areas and tissues. While the biological nervous system gives us “signal” to and from the brain and nerve endings, which results in awareness *of* our body from that signal, it is the energy flow through the nervous system and the ability of our nervous system to carry the EOA which makes for the possibility of *awareness in* our body. It is the EOA which gives us direct, felt-sense of being spread into and through our body, which we can truly call embodiment, rather than experiencing ourselves as only perched in our head, observing our bodily experience from afar.

III. Consciousness, as the energy of awareness, is embodied via the pathway 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 locate their “I” they are more 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” ones body is not the same as living *in* ones body. We don’t fully *occupy* our bodily being. The “common sense” 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 EOA, is more embedded in our brain and head than elsewhere in our body.

If you look at the figure to the right, you can observe how the nervous system so beautifully connects all the body areas and parts to the brain. You will recall how energy

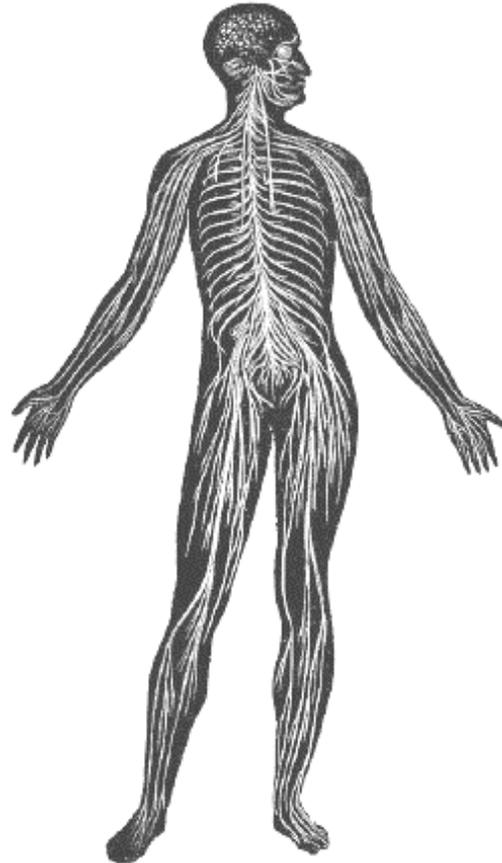


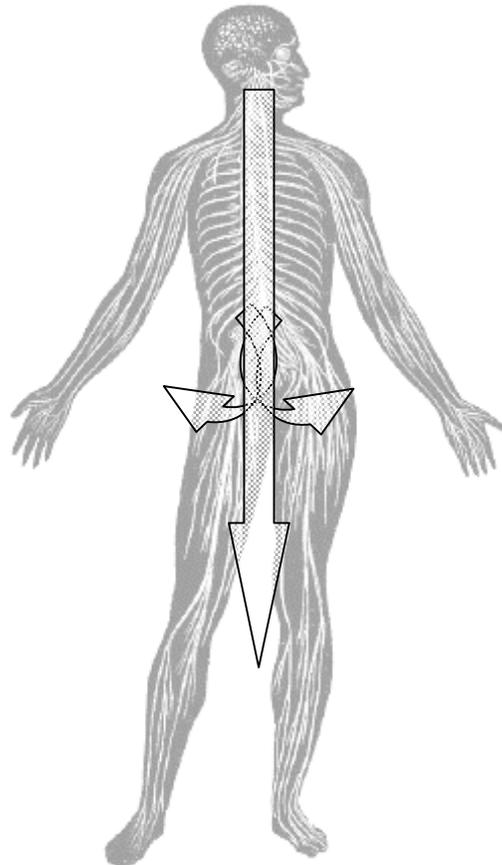
Figure : Embodiment via the Nervous System

behaves like water in the sense that it flows, fills into tissue, 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 in the picture is like an open set of conduits. Imagine pouring a stream of water from the brain “downward” filling all the channels of the nerves. Then picture a drop of blue dye centered in the brain, the particular energy quality of consciousness we are calling the EOA, spreading downward and out into these watery channels until it filters all the way into the nerve endings and then into the body tissues. *If the brain is the putative “seat of consciousness,” and 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, as the energy of awareness, is embodied via the pathway of the nervous system in a cephalo-caudal-peripheral 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, or 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, both autonomic and skeletal, and into body 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 by which awareness spreads through the nervous system that helps us understand why certain classical body psychotherapy interventions don’t seem to last very long. Grounding is one example of this. Many body oriented psychotherapies do a lot of physical work with the client’s legs to help them to be more in their body and connected to the ground and to their self supports, aware of their lower half. Body oriented psychotherapy approaches often work via the muscular system, through stretching and or generating vibration and sensation through vigorous movement. But if the nervous system is the means by which awareness connects downward into the body core and there to the limbs, then grounding



work through the muscular system may not be the best approach. While muscular work certainly creates energy charge and sensation in the areas being stimulated, thus creating more temporary signal for the biological nervous system, such work may not adequately open the nerves to the resulting energetic flow. And, more fundamentally, this may be working in the wrong direction in terms of how consciousness connects into embodiment: the bottom up instead of from the head down.

Imagine the nervous system 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 towards the legs the energy of awareness. Muscular work may make muscles available to energy but not clear the nerves in the legs to flow, making the effects of grounding work readily dissipate 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 which 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 nervous system.

In addition, for some clients, all that stimulation and charge in their lower body can actually "chase out" their awareness from their nerves in their lower body, because it is overwhelming and the "I" retreats from it (particularly true with survivors of trauma). Grounding is more rapidly facilitated and longer lasting by energetically clearing the nervous system, especially the big nerves in the legs, and making it accessible to the EOA from the head down.

V. The relative availability of our nervous system tissue to energy greatly determines our capacity for and experience of embodiment.

It is obvious to anyone who works with body experience that, while 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 "I," some parts of us we barely feel at all, let alone feel present in and. Put in the terms of this paper, 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 able to truly occupy our physical being. Contra-wise, when our nervous system tissue is limited in energy flow, we experience our bodily life more at a distance and indirect, or hardly at all. The observation from body oriented psychotherapy 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 emotion 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 energy of) awareness. The “waxed cloth” metaphor used in the prior 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 a) their nervous system is not particularly open or available to energy flow, and b) their EOA literally *can't* get in to 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, in the punch line of an old joke, “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 bodily areas that were vacated for defensive purposes, we must distinguish defensive avoidance from the incapacity for experience. Therapists are often too ready to attribute ongoing incapacity to defense, blaming the client for their inability or 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 only experience the defensive purpose when their capacity 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, and our degree of consciousness in these parts of our nervous system (mediated by the energetic availability of that part of our nervous system) effects our psychological functioning and sense of self.

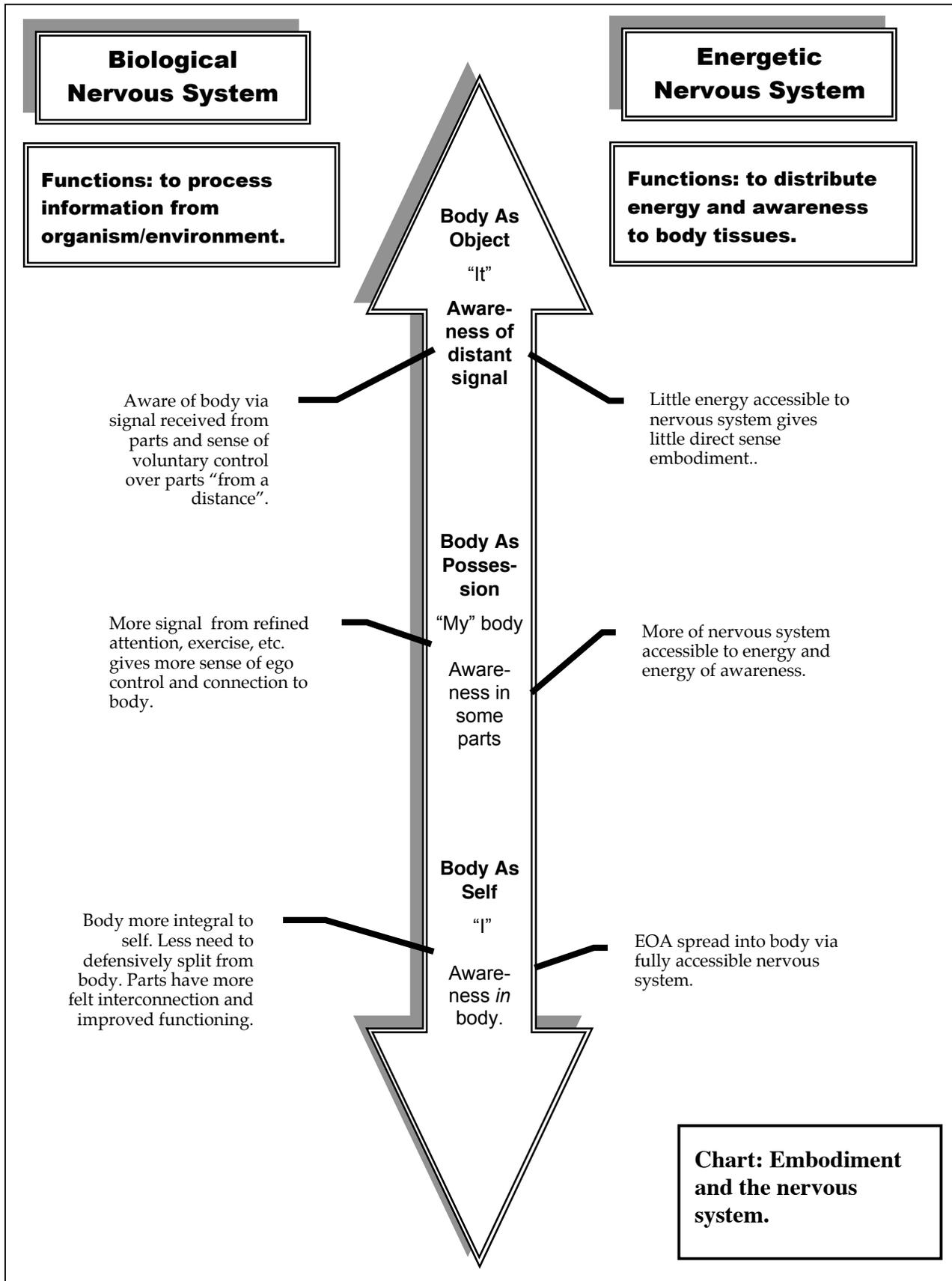
So far we have spoken of the *general* availability of the nervous system to the EOA and our general sense of being embodied. Body oriented psychotherapists have long noted that the specific location and degree to which a person's awareness occupies their body has an impact on their psychological functioning. For example, as a way to cope with physical or sexual trauma a person may withdraw their awareness from specific traumatized bodily areas, which may result in being unable to make that 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 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 neuro-muscular dimension of embodiment is the most energetically available part of them, predisposing them to relating to the world through *activity*, but relatively unaware of their visceral inner sensation and so 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 have an experience!” as one man put it to me in the course of therapy.

Our experience through our different body systems each creates important nuances that somatically anchor us to different aspects of 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 of our organs, bones and muscles. We will have a clear sense of being “in” that part of us, and 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, though we have been regularly told by our scientific education that we cannot be consciously aware of. Although the *function* of our autonomic nervous system are not governed by aware cognition, in our work we have found we can have surprisingly detailed awareness of our autonomic organs when the EOA has access 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 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 preceding chart attempts to give summary to the two natures of our nervous system, and show 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 that part of our nervous system) effects 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.

Experience of basic being: the brain and existence

The brain and feeling located

From a body oriented psychotherapy'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's is very much about location, location, location. To exist is have a sense of location inside a body. To incarnate derives from the Latin *in carne*, which is *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 paper, our sense of being located in the head comes from the way in which nerve tissue carries the EOA. Since 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, which gives us the very fundamental ground experience of I-am. Descartes famous phrase would 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!

Chart: Experience of embodiment through the nervous system

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

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 pre-natal problems, which significantly disturbed the very process of fusing consciousness to matter 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 being* 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 most ready nerve pathways for energy occur through the bigger nerves of the body³ and those 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 sense of being present as 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 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.

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 body self as agent and container, but as embodied beings we are both container and contents, a phrase used by Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen (1993). Our experience of having contents or insides comes from our autonomic nervous system, the parasympathetic and sympathetic nerves which 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 unawares and not accessible to conscious awareness or control. Medical doctors have even told me that we only have internal organ sensation under conditions of disease, such as gastric pain or indigestion! But even on the biological level, nerve signal from our internal organs is 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.

³ It appears that literal nerve tissue volume has something to do with how much energy can be carried through 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.

As the autonomic nervous system is made more accessible to energy, our sense of “having insides” is even more clear and pronounced. We also have greater access to our inner life, our inner emotions, our gut feelings, and to 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 bodily sensorium this turns out to be a lack of sensation, like a mouth area numbed by anesthetic, where they 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 energetic connection and availability.

An open energetic flow from our CNS into the autonomic nervous system nerves creates a clearer sense of *having insides*: registering our inner sensation and process. 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 is 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 brain stem and branches into the heart, lungs, and mid abdominal 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 signal, that we have a sense of our insides, our inner gut/visceral sense of experience.

Sensory nerve signal 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 it is 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 process. For example, in panic and anxiety disorder the person feels himself or herself as taken over by a wave of anxiety rising up from the solar plexus or chest which occurs “from nowhere.” As we open the nerve pathways to energetic flow and thus create access for the EOA clients experience a sense of their insides, and find more connection to their emotions and inner life.

Parasympathetic nervous system experience-

Vagal experience:

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

The experience of being energetically present and connected into 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 into our sympathetic nerves (see below). Much of our vagal experience of self is related to the sensations and process of feeding and ingesting food: an open and receptive quality of experience in the eyes and mouth, a sense of moving down and into ones soft body core, a suffusing warmth in the chest that comes with slowing cardiac activity and bronchial dilation, the sensations of interior satisfaction and fullness which comes 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, heart-felt wounds, difficulty with self-comforting and self soothing, difficulty with love, relatedness, lack of internal sense of sufficiency, and so on, are often related to energetic blockage and lack of presence in parts of the vagus 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 and transverse colon, seem to give us more definite and distinctive qualities of experience. We might best describe registry of our lower parasympathetic nervous system as experiencing 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.

Sympathetic nervous system experience

Physiologically, the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system is responsible for arousal states, and to prepare the us for high output activity, the so-called “fight or flight” reaction: increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiration, decrease in

peristalsis and digestive activity (to free metabolic energy for the brain and muscles), an increase in cortisol and other adrenal secretions.⁴ Phenomenologically, this creates a general internal sense of charge and excitement, a feeling of being energized and actively engaged or readiness for engagement.

Our energetic experience of being in our sympathetic nervous system is in part related to this physiological sense of arousal, but 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, interior to the body. Nerve roots at each vertebral level reflex from the spinal cord to the ganglion. Recall that our main route of incarnation or inhabitation into embodiment is first from our brain downwards into our spinal cord. When we energetically inhabit our spinal cord and our sympathetic ganglion chain we 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 feel much more able to hold our personal ground unswayed when we have it. A lot of issues which psychotherapists have framed in our era as about “boundaries” are not about how we manage interaction at our edges at all, but rather are how we feel displaced from this axis-center in our body. If we are not adequately anchored in our sympathetic/spinal axis through these parts of our nervous system, we easily “loose ourselves” and center upon the experience or agenda of others.

As energy can spread into the sympathetic nerves that reflex from the ganglion into specific organs we have 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 our connection to the parasympathetic nerves into the organs) but of being somewhat expanded, internally defined and toned.

Experience of Self as Activity: the neuro-muscular connection

When the energy of awareness is engaged into the musculo-skeletal nerves the sense of oneself as a definitive and bounded being, as well as of oneself as being about activity becomes paramount. The sensory signal generated by our muscular tonus, when our tonus is adequate, leaves us with a sense of having a definite boundary, a shell so to speak, which has vibrancy and strength. If you have lifted weights at all, this sense of “I am” that comes from charged and tone musculature is quite familiar. Our sense of personal capacity and strength, which importantly relates to the feeling of our coping capacity,

⁴ Overall, increase in sympathetic nervous system activity tends to decrease parasympathetic activity, although in some areas these both are required, as in sexual arousal where heart rate increase and yet peripheral vasodilation (for erection and genital swelling) co-occur.

comes in part from our muscular and movement capacity and especially from the neuro-sensory feedback we derive from an active, charged musculature.

In addition to feedback and self-definition, the quality of energetic emphasis on our muscular being also effects 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 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 Autonomy⁵ structure the emphasis on guarding against manipulation by engaging the social world defensively through high output action or charm distal to the body directs all the energy of the personality towards 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 therapy work that attempts to work through the musculature in this character structure usually reinforces this defense by mobilizing more energy output at this body shell. It does little to safely connect 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 from. Energetic work on the autonomic nervous system goes more directly to the heart of the matter for this kind of character structure.

As a contrast, the Need structure (Oral) has the opposite problem. This structure must develop stronger energy and conscious connection to their muscular capacity and shell. Without this they feel weak, unbounded, 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 nature.

Reformulation of the process of body oriented psychotherapy.

Body oriented psychotherapists have worked to develop client’s body awareness through physical means (touch based work, movement, exercises, breathing, etc.) and understand it as a defense/adaptation. These techniques are predominantly muscular in nature, seeking to release defensively held tensions and emotional patterns, or seek to flood the body systems with energy charge via breathing, the use of movement and touch, and so on. The effect on the nervous system is usually indirect and secondary. Under terms of the current discussion it appears that until the nervous 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 inability. The muscular system per se seems to be the most indirect means to accomplish this.

⁵ This term is derived from Bodydynamics. The term in used Reichian theory is the psychopathic structure.

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 which 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 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. And, it avoids the “collateral damage” which can come from excessive reenactment, regression, flooding of traumatized systems, re-traumatization and imprinting, and so on, the iatrogenic problems inherent in certain forms of body therapy work.

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