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ENERGY AS EMOTION

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Emotional wellness is a complex subject. Each of us has our own conditioning that tells us certain emotions are 'good' and others are 'bad.' Well, here's the news: emotions are neither good nor bad. Emotions are simply energy moving through the body. Emotions are not something to be gotten rid of, judged, or analyzed. Anger, for example, in its truest form is really an urge to express ourselves authentically in the world. It has a positive intention - it is trying to accomplish something for us. Anger occurs when our authentic expression becomes blocked because of our mental framework. Just like a dam that holds the water back, any kind of blockage in our system causes energy to build up behind it. Emotion is actually quite a beautiful thing, because it creates an opportunity to set that energy into motion and free the blockage, awakening us to the mental construct to which we cling in the process.

Every act of life is done either with a purity of intention, without apology, and is legitimate in that moment, or it is not. If it is not, energy will be retained in the system in some pathologic way that becomes a storyline and a theme song for our life. Every emotion we might term negative has a pure expression that is a normal expression of our true self. The experience of any negative emotion is a clue to mental constructs that may be awry. For example, pure fear can motivate and energize an instantaneous action that is a normal response in the face of being overwhelmed. But because of our conditioning, our busy 'monkey mind' takes over. We monitor our actions and reactions to conform to our beliefs, accepted roles, or societal expectations. In this way, the purity of the energy in response to a threat can be compromised. This can become a chronic headache or backache or other physical symptom.

People come in to see me with pain, and as we release the pain through mindbody work, emotions inevitably start to come to the surface. As the emotions are released, the storyline surfaces. Our body will always tell the truth of our perceptual framework. It will not lie to us. It is not ultimate truth, but it is the truth we live, and until we do the work it is all we know. In mindbody work, the answer is always to bring attention to that which is maladaptive - to that which is tight, tense, and painful. The current medical model where our whole focus is on dulling or deadening pain with one form or another of anesthesia is a travesty. It's no wonder people are having trouble - they can't feel whatever is calling their attention from their inner self; the part that is hurting and wanting attention. The obesity epidemic in this country is an example of this tendency to anesthetize ourselves. For instance, 'Frances' (assumed names used for anonymity) came to see me to deal with her obesity. Through our work together, she realized that every diet she had ever tried had worked. However, whenever she lost enough weight that she began to feel attractive and sexy, what came to the surface was her terror at being sexually

attractive and all the attention that was associated with it. It was much easier to cover it up quickly than to deal with the feelings that were so overwhelming in her body when she felt attractive.

Western medicine agrees with Chinese medicine on this: over-expressed or under-expressed emotions take their toll on the body. For example, scientists have done some wonderful double-blinded controlled studies that prove anger and hostility are directly correlated with heart attacks and high blood pressure. Over time, under-expressed emotions (as Frances experienced) lead to inevitable decline of the taxed body. If we repress our emotions, our sense of vitality may eventually be suppressed to the point of depression. Thus, if we suffer from depression this can be a clue that we may be repressing anger and not giving ourselves permission to express what we need to express in the world. On the other hand, we may over-express emotions.

For example, we carry our emotions and the associated mind-talk with us wherever we go - whether we're alone or in company. A few years ago, for instance, I was walking to the store one beautiful spring day and I had just stepped off the sidewalk to cross the street when I suddenly became aware that I was feeling tense and had an abrasive internal dialogue going on. I thought, "You know, I'm carrying on an argument in my head, and there's nobody else here! Who am I arguing with?" Most of us have conversations like that going on in our head all the time. As those conversations are going on, our body is reacting *as if the situation we are focused on was actually happening*. We play the part of each character in the scene, and our muscles tense in response to whatever we're thinking. In other words, our physiology corresponds with the thoughts we hold about our life experiences. This is a very powerful recognition.

Constriction and the fight mentality

True emotional wellness comes when you allow every single flavor of energy movement in the body, every emotion, to find its natural voice. When you begin to pay attention to your mental patterns, you will begin to notice a relationship between the thoughts you are thinking and the emotions you are carrying. Then you will begin to notice an interrelationship among your thoughts, your emotions, and your physical structure. For example, if you experience chronic fear or anger, your body will begin to reflect constriction, and the sensations associated with that constriction sooner or later can become pain. If you pay attention, your emotions can provide clues through your body to what is getting in the way of your free and authentic interaction with life. In fact, you are in possession of the best biofeedback mechanism on the planet!

The quality of emotion or body_sensation you experience in response to different life situations depends on your belief system. Problems arise when Problematic beliefs, and the resulting constriction, take over. Whatever your beliefs are, typically they reflect a recurring theme storyline; the storyline of which is recognized *within the physical structure of your body*.

For example, Betty came to see me to figure out why her stomach was hurting. The first time she saw me, she came to get rid of the symptoms. On the second visit, she said the symptoms were getting worse, but what was coming out of the work was so rich that she cared less about the pain and more about what was behind the pain. She realized she was there to find out what her stomach was trying to tell her. What she learned is that she had literally *stuffed*

painful and frightening emotions around serious abuse in her childhood. She experienced a holding back, a 'stuckness' in her energy matrix.

This type of holding-in symptom typically includes more than one dynamic. It might reflect a fear to release as well as a hesitation to express. The unwillingness to express might imply that Betty is afraid of the ramifications of her full expression because she fears some sort of loss or punishment if she connects with and releases the emotions.

Constrictions or barriers to a healthy energy flow show up as fear, guilt, shame, anger, and feelings of helplessness. At the core level, we may believe that it is not possible to get what we want - that the object of our desire is not available in the world or that we are not worthy of it even if it is available. We believe that we have done something wrong, or are so bad that we don't deserve to get what we want. If we do get what we want, we believe it will probably be taken from us, so we hold on tight. This belief is called, in Christian language, 'original sin'. Most religions have some variation of the story about being driven out of the Garden of Eden, but what does that really mean? It means that when we exclude ourselves from the flow of infinite possibility by our own mental constructs, we remove from our energy matrix a significant portion of those possibilities that are inherent within us. And we do that through our own thinking. I find this is an exciting aspect of mindbody therapy, one that unfolds in infinite variations that are unique to each person I work with.

We in the Western world are particularly yang – we approach our health like warriors: “Get out the battleaxe, fight that pathogen! Win this battle against disease! Fight that enemy!” The hard work, then, is learning to cultivate the yin aspect. The hardest work is to surrender to what is and open ourselves to the inner lessons that then unfold.

Mindbody work gives us a key to unlock the door leading to the deep knowing of our potentials, which can then open many new and creative possibilities for expressing our true selves. It is hard work. It is hard because we are so accustomed to fighting our way through problems that we feel are obstructing our progress. If someone disagrees with our opinion, for example, we may feel compelled to 'argue to win.' Dropping the fight means to allow room for all opinions to coexist in equal space which reduces stress dramatically. In effect, we, take the pressure off ourselves when we no longer need to win. It is difficult - almost beyond imagining - to lay down our weapons and let ourselves experience the pain resulting from the tension itself. But it is essential to go into that experience. Until we do, the tension *cannot* be dissolved. By definition, if we are rigged up and ready to fight, the tension has its harbor, its reason for existence, and it perpetuates the constriction that we are trying so hard to release.

Going beyond the story

It is important with emotions, as with a storyline in general, that we don't get too caught up in trying to define or 'figure out' what emotion we are having. The challenge is to move away from categorical thinking. Naming emotions can sometimes give us a handle for conversation, and that is useful. It is convenient for us to say, “I feel anger” or “I feel sad” or “I feel fearful” when we are conversing with each other. But what really matters is to acknowledge the *sensations* associated with the emotion we are experiencing. Certain sensations are associated with the constriction of energy moving through us, and the different flavors of that constriction are what we label emotion. The more we become accustomed to identifying the sensations we are feeling in the body, the more capable we will be to articulate our experience. However, the point is not necessarily to identify the emotion. A problem with the old therapy paradigm is we

think that by naming it we've cured it, and that's not the case. Fixing things outside ourselves will not solve the problem, either. Sometimes circumstances do need to change, but that is beside the point here.

What we really need to do with the whole issue of emotions is to adopt an entirely new paradigm. We've grown accustomed to thinking of emotions as discrete entities that can be described and named. Instead, we might view emotions as energetic patterns that reflect certain mental constructs. These mental constructs become our stories about how the world is and how we are within the world. In our search for wholeness, it is important not to seek to change the story and thus change the construct, but to move beyond the story and the construct entirely. The invitation is to dismantle and abandon the conceptual framework that defines our inner – and therefore as well our outer - limits.

It is common wisdom that in any given experience every person in a room will usually tell a different story about what occurred. We all make up stories to explain our internal experience. But as long as we define our future based on such stories, we are stuck in a cycle of repeating them. If we define our reality by our stories, by our history, we are not giving ourselves any new options. We cannot experience anything in our lives other than what we have already experienced until we *allow something new into our lives*. Having made up a story, it becomes our self-definition or the definition of 'how things are', and we become trapped into a repetition of that story. Remember that *we* are the creators of our stories, and our stories do not reflect ultimate reality. The stories we tell ourselves and others are invitations to that which we will allow into our lives.

The path is to rest deeply inside the sensation we are having and not run away from it. Don't explain it away or blame it on anyone else. Go deeply into the sensation and acknowledge the constriction. Let the story with which we have explained our life to ourselves dissolve. Let it become more fluid. Like magic, the emotion we think we are experiencing will transform. That's because the emotion we are experiencing is just a sensation in the body reflecting a particular pattern of stuck energy. Emotion is energy moving against the barrier of the mental construct we have created and are living out as our reality.

Susan was 58 years old when she came to see me. She walked with a cane because her leg had been shattered in a car accident at age 20. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 39 after suffering symptoms of the disease for 20 years. She had seen numerous doctors over the years, but none had the complete picture of her symptoms because she was telling herself the story that they would write her off as a hypochondriac. By the time I saw her, she was suffering from acute back pain, migraine headaches, and trauma-induced osteoarthritis. She was also suffering from side-effects from the many drugs she was taking for her diverse symptoms and was severely depressed. She couldn't sleep because of the pain. Her inner critic was running her life and she felt useless. As we began our work together, Susan began to see where her story as a victim of tragic circumstances was running her life. She began to learn that there were things she could do to help herself—that she didn't have to be the victim of her many physical symptoms. Instead of being stuck in the story of "I can't do anything anymore," she rediscovered her love of painting. She has not had a miraculous 'cure,' but now she sleeps better and has learned to live with her pain in a new way. She has also learned techniques to minimize the pain. She recognizes her struggle as a spiritual journey and has a more positive outlook.

In attempting to disengage from a story we have told ourselves, we will often encounter several obstacles. The first obstacle is the dishonesty we have engaged in to maintain the storyline. I call it dishonesty only because it is a fabrication - it is not a blatant lie, but it is

selective sight. Everything we see and experience goes through a conceptual framework. The fabric of our lives becomes dense with the stories that exist in our mind, and we fear that letting go of any particular thread of that fabric will lead to unraveling our experience of life. It is terribly threatening to the storyline when we deselect or reselect or unselect, or even recognize the selectivity of elements in our stories. For example, if every person who plays a particular role in our life no longer holds a clear position in our mind, our relationship with that person is suddenly undefined. If our spouse, for instance, is the reactive bully who speaks harshly to our self-imposed, whining victim, s/he will no longer have that part to play in our life when we no longer accept the role of victim. When the script changes, it can be disorienting for everyone involved.

The second obstacle we might face is the anxiety that occurs when we start to let go of our illusions about how we know *ourselves* to be, as contained within the story. That anxiety can be nearly unbearable. Why? Because we accept ourselves to be the role that we are playing in the stories we are telling. Our myth has become our identity. To let go of the story then requires a change in our self-identity.

Another difficulty in letting go of the story is that certain individuals may have come into our lives because they fit into the roles we need them to fulfill. We may have grown familiar with those who inhabit our life, and even if they play a negative role in our story, we may experience a horrible fear of loss. That is natural when we are faced with the discomforting potential of having people move out of our life. Women who are caught in abusive relationships, for example, have a terrible sense of loss when they drop the victim storyline.

Finally, if we change our role in a story it means that, like Susan, we will have to accept more responsibility for our life. So wherever we have relegated ourselves and our function to a familiar script, we will have to pause and think about our circumstances from a fresh, unknown space. This is at once liberating and frightening in its enormity. We must be more awake and fluid in the moment and recognize that we always have the ultimate choice about how to respond to a given situation. The solidity of the familiar is comforting, so breaking out of the pattern can be scary. For example, we can no longer relinquish responsibility to the familiar other who defines our reality for us because "that's the way we are." We must be willing to accept the discomfort of loss and let go of the fear associated with being responsible for ourselves and our own life. We must be willing to live in the uneasiness that arises in the process of becoming disillusioned about who we are, moment to moment.

Several qualities are extremely helpful in facilitating a shift in how we relate to our stories, and the first is a sense of trust in a bigger picture. Every religion and spiritual discipline talks about the need for death or dying in order to find ourselves. The process of disillusionment *is* a sensation of dying, and we can't go there if we don't trust. Some might call that faith in a higher Being. However we think of it, it must be some space into which we dare to surrender ourselves as we know ourselves to be. We must let ourselves be reworked, reformatted, and freed of the painful habitual constrictions and the lies we have told ourselves.

That kind of faith requires tremendous courage, because it is the unknown into which we surrender. This is another layer of courage beyond what it takes, for instance, to move to a new town or begin a new career. The sort of courage I'm talking about is the courage it takes to surrender into the space where we don't know who we will be and we don't know who anybody else will be. We will be entering a space where we haven't defined anything. It feels like leaping off a cliff.

Facing the fear

When we finally set our defenses aside and just breathe quietly, what often comes up is fear. We experience the fear of what will happen if we don't defend ourselves. After all, if we don't fight, who will protect us? If we set down our weapons, our self-defeating behaviors, our fight language, our self-righteous behaviors, our justifications - if we set all that down, what are we left with? We're left with the terror, the sensation that we're not going to make it. Sitting with that sensation of terror takes the most tremendous courage imaginable. It will take however long it takes for the fear to pass, and there is no guarantee that we'll immediately start feeling better. Of course we want to do all of this because we want to feel better, so the fact that we have to sit through agony to get there is not particularly appealing! However, most spiritual traditions recognize that at some point the biggest barrier of all is the effort we make. Letting go of effort doesn't mean we sit passively in an attitude of helplessness - that is still fight energy turned inward, and it is still a barrier because it creates tension.

Fear exists in layers. The most obvious fear is the jitters, the anxiety we experience when we stop fighting and all the superficial reasons why we must go on fighting arise. That's just the outer layer, but we have to go through that to get to the deeper layers of fear. One of the deeper layers is our self-image - what we believe we really are - and we all have many aspects to that self-image. In the metaphor of the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve ate the apple, what they got was illusory thinking. As human beings, we define ourselves in relationship to every experience or person we encounter in our world. In every interaction, we carry with us an image of who we are relative to that situation or person. We must strip all that away. We must let go of all our illusions of who we think we are relative to the world, relative to other people, relative to anything we think we want. Those images are barriers to our authentic expression, and dropping them, because they define ourselves to ourselves, will produce fear at first.

If we drop the fight, we are naked of our illusions. We fear being exposed for...what? *That* what is what we must discover! Often at the very center of all the layers of fear is a kernel of deep belief that is the most poignant and the most fearful. We will go through enormous shenanigans to avoid looking at it. Think about the distractions we use to avoid facing our illusions - television, noise, busyness, caffeine, sugar, alcohol, relationships, or mall shopping. It doesn't matter what it is, anything that keeps us occupied and preoccupied is a distraction. When we drop the distraction and sink deeper, we will start to encounter, engage with, and expose the layers of fears about who we are, and who we might be, and what we might not be able to do, what we might represent, and so on and so forth. Expose them for what they are. They are just fears, but they are running our lives. We will find that the kernel of fear in the middle of it all is some variation of "I'm bad" or "I'm not okay" or "There something's wrong with me" or "I can't." We will tap into some negation of the self that is so primordial and so basic that it is the original sin. That's where it all began. That's what kicked us out of the garden. That is why we can't believe in ourselves and why we cannot succeed in the ways we want to succeed.

All the layers of fear covered over by the images we have created out of that initial scar in our energy matrix are what create the complexity in our lives. The ways we protect ourselves, the way we stay overly busy, striving, angry, rejecting - all of that exists in the layers of fear that then become what we believe to be our concrete selves. We might try to make ourselves acceptable by projecting the 'nice guy' image, the 'good girl' image, or the 'highly successful' image. These are usually masks that we present to the world, and underneath those masks are all the layers of fear. So it is no mystery why good girls get headaches by the end of the day and good boys get heart attacks. When we live for any length of time within the constraints of such internal dialogue and tension, no matter how well hidden, it inevitably takes its toll on

the body. The masks we use to 'be acceptable' in the face of that which we deny only complicates the matter because the body truly will reflect sooner or later, in tangible form, the internal dynamics we habitually play out. Hiding the facets of ourselves we don't like behind a façade does not solve the problem. It actually makes it worse by keeping us from accessing the deeper level where we can make a difference – and heal.

The ball of twine gets quite complex, and the hard work comes from experiencing the sensations that arise as we thaw out those frozen complexities. It can be excruciatingly painful. In our culture we have grown accustomed to anesthetizing ourselves, to relieving our pain. We want more relief, more distractions, so we add more and more layers. The human mind is uniquely equipped to live in fantasy, taking up residence in the stories we make up as explanation for our situation. Within the framework of these stories, we tend to frame ourselves in complimentary ways that keep us out of the muck of facing our inner tensions.

Mindbody work requires the opposite approach, but not many people want to do it. Because the body carries the full repertoire of our internal states without the benefit of the lies our minds convince us of, reentering the full naked awareness of our organic selves can be quite a shock. Most people are forced into it by a crisis where they are ripped open. The shell can get ripped open in a variety of ways when we are forced to see some degree of nakedness about ourselves that we don't want to face. We can be shorn of a part of our self-image by loss of job, a mate, a life situation. Sometimes these losses take us deeper into that core of our self.

When we are forced to look down into their core and find ourselves shorn of all the images we had of ourselves, we often find it difficult to acknowledge and accept that core as who we truly are]. We tend to rebuild life around the familiar again. So we hear people say things like, "We were so bonded as a community after the hurricane went through...after I lost my house... after I discovered I had cancer." But life continues, and we go back to the familiar patterns we know. That's where we find the challenge and complexity in [mindbody work - staying connected with what truly is, staying awake.

A new way of being

Going beyond the story means to approach life with a sense of adventure. As we let go, we develop curiosity and a sense of openness toward whatever life presents to us. We redefine the pain and darkness as a feeling of potential instead of tensing up and fighting it. We are able to gracefully let go and accept an unknown future.

We will be brave in greeting ourself as a new friend. When we have the courage to drop our story, we meet ourselves again and again and we are okay with whoever we find ourselves to be. If we let go, we are bound to see the next layer of self-definition. Patience with ourselves is needed because there are many layers, and it is a process. We are brave in welcoming the stranger - we greet our new self with an open heart. We dare to have an experience that is authentically different from anything that we have experienced before.

Heidi, a client who saw me for assistance in dealing with irritable bowel syndrome, revealed this awareness beautifully. After a session in which she had done particularly deep work, facing the intense constrictions she carried in her body related to her relationship with her father, she remarked on how she felt "like something major that seemed like a part of me is missing." Sitting for a moment on the edge of the treatment table, Heidi reflected: "You know, the biggest challenge right now for me really is to not go looking for the familiar painful feeling

again.” It takes courage to dare to experience ourselves as fundamentally missing some facet through which we have created an identity of ourselves.

With this bravery comes a deeper humility and a heart-centered friendliness to all we meet. We choose love with whatever we find. We let go of the constriction that protects us from seeing whatever it was we didn't want to see. This is the heart of healing: above all else, to be committed to encountering everything in our life, including ourselves, with loving kindness.

A balancing act

One of the underpinnings to a sense of wholeness, and therefore wellness, is balance. But let's look at what that really means. I frequently hear people say, “I wish I had a more balanced life” - as if it were a static sort of thing. Balance is not static. For example, we can stand on one foot and we might appear stable, but in actuality all the muscles in that foot are wiggling like crazy even as we rest in the awareness of being centered. Things are constantly changing. If we judge ourselves negatively because we notice we are wiggling while standing on one foot, we will most likely tense up and topple over. The irony is that if we just accept the wiggling and make whatever adjustments are necessary, we can continue to stand that way indefinitely. To surrender into the notion of balance means the recognition that a corrective force is needed on a continual basis. In fact, just accepting that notion helps us much more quickly come into balance.

[[We don't stop adjusting – even when centered. It is continuing dynamic. If we have an attitude that we will 'get there' – i.e. centered as a done deal with no more adjustment to what is – we create tension of resistance and judgment about how we aren't there yet. The wiggling and adjusting are not indicators of having 'not yet arrived.']]

As another example, our human reaction to a strong emotion like grief is to want to get rid of it. But if we never allow ourselves to fully experience grief, [[it will remain to fester inside us, begging through our unconscious awareness to be released,] and]we will never feel the open heart of joy. If we have truly let ourselves feel deep betrayal or the deep pain of loss, we know these issues and processes that have been detailed here. We wake up one day and find that we have been carried into a deeper awareness of ourselves and that our heart has opened in a new way. However, we cannot know that sweetness if we have not allowed ourselves to go to into the darkness. Conversely, if we wallow in or indulge the darkness, we will never come through to the light of joy. To cling to the state of feeling blue is just as dysfunctional as to reject it outright. It's a balancing act of accepting 'what is' to be as it is, while remaining open to change. When we recognize the continual dynamic nature of all our sensations and emotions we can be fully with them, and allow them to gracefully pass on when they have done their transformative work on us. We are not attached to the form of the emotion or circumstance itself, but recognize it as yet one more face of the everchanging flow of life.

The Chinese yin yang symbol gives us a wonderful representation of this idea of balance. Neither the feminine aspect of yin (darkness, wetness, coldness) nor the masculine aspect of yang (activity, lightness, dryness) are static states. Yin and yang define one another. One can only be defined *in relationship* to the other. This is a subtle but profound concept. As the symbol teaches, at the point where either yin or yang is at their strongest they automatically contain and become the other.

I discuss the individual aspects of our wholeness - health, mental wellbeing, emotional wellness, relational balance, and a sense of purpose. Please recognize that this is just for convenience, because these aspects are contained within the totality of who we are and they are not ultimately separate. Just like in the yin yang symbol, the state of one aspect defines the other aspect. If we are out of balance in one area, by definition that means we are out of balance in another area. Finding our true center requires constant 'wiggling' to remain whole and healthy.

Life is constantly changing. In finding balance, we will sometimes look a little messy and ungraceful. Once we accept the truth of that idea, we will receive the power, energy, and strength to do what we need to do to come back to balance. We make the necessary changes from the effortless state of surrender into the Tao, into *Shen*, into the path, into the will of God.

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