

# Embodied Awareness – Identity and the Body in Meditation and Psychotherapy

## Robin Hobbes

This is a brief paper on the connection between the body and identity within the domains of meditation and psychotherapy. I am going to compare aspects of bodily experience that lead to significant understandings of identity. These aspects of bodily experience are found in both psychotherapy and meditation. I will emphasise some similarities and differences. Both activities use the body but I will argue that there is a significant difference in the sense of identity developed from the two activities.

Firstly some general comments on meditation. What is meditation? You find so many different uses of this word from a well-defined activity that contains precise guidelines for action – something like “sit cross legged on the floor, close your eyes, notice your breathing , internally recite these words” to something very general like “contemplate”, “concentrate”, “be”. This variety is both useful as it encourages openness and flexibility and problematic as, at its extreme, everything is meditation. It suits my purposes here to define meditation as a **form** of concentration and contemplation. And to say that what is concentrated on and contemplated is one’s own identity. Meditation is a contemplation and concentration on oneself. I’ll come back to this later.

Transactional Analysis has been deeply interested in identity. Script theory is all about the formation of identity through the complex of injunctions, counter injunctions, programs and decisions. I favour Bill Cornell’s description of script as an on-going process of psychological self-definition (Cornell, 1988). In Cornell’s thinking life is a process in which the question “Who Am I?” is continually asked and answered by each one of us. He implies these answers are continually changing and evolving as we move through the life cycle. One of the distinctive features of the psychotherapeutic experience is the provision of optimal conditions for the deconstruction and construction of identity.

There is something else here which is very important. It seems a bit obvious but nevertheless there are all sorts of resonances and importances in it. Meditation and psychotherapy are bodily activities. Transactional Analysts pay a lot of attention to the body. Two ways that immediately come to mind are in ego states and in ulterior transactions. Both involve the recognition of bodily patterns. In ego states we place the emerging bodily patterns into the framework of Parent, Adult and Child states of the ego. Our interest in the presence or absence of congruence between the words a client uses and their bodily expression takes us to ulterior transactions. There is a well-developed methodology in TA for noticing and responding to the body. Similarly there is a well-developed methodology in meditation to notice and respond to the body.

Let’s look at something very specific that occurs in a psychotherapy session. A client appears to get upset – an intensity of experience seems to be emerging within her and is noticed by the therapist

through observations of the presence of an Ulterior Transaction. The client tenses her right hand and tilts her head back while saying “It all depends”. The therapist then says “What’s happening in your body right now as you say that?” or “Notice your body” or some such thing. The therapist has taken a decision to draw the client’s attention to the embodied nature of psychotherapy. They’re saying – you’re in a body notice it. What commonly occurs is some expressiveness followed by a deepening of understanding – a new sense of personal identity. Sometimes in the TA world this is called the development of awareness. By awareness is meant a new understanding of experience, the recovery of a memory, the deepening of a felt recalled experience and a development in self-understanding. This is the construction/deconstruction of identity. The on-going process of psychological self-definition occurs through the linking of experience to the body. The client speaks of themselves differently “I am acceptable” for example when they have previously conceived of themselves as unacceptable. We could call this a form of embodied awareness.

Turning to meditation the same attention to the body is often encouraged. In the Keno Upanishad, an early Hindu text on Identity, a student asks a teacher “Who is it that makes the eye see, the ear hear and the mind think?” Like the client in the previous paragraph the student is also pursuing the question of identity - “Who Am I?” The teacher replies “It is the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear and the mind of the mind”. This appears to be a rather odd mystical reply. In fact it is a deliberately precise answer. The teacher is alerting the student to the body. They are saying to the student follow your body – it is through your body that you will arrive at an answer to this question.

Attention to the body is an intrinsic part of meditational practices. One description of this is found in Ken Mellor’s idea and practice of Grounding (Mellor 1981). Mellor suggests that we deliberately notice the physicality of our experience. He speaks of noticing inner physical experience in the form of that that is occurring sensately inside of you, coupled with deliberately noticing the outside world through the five senses. He describes this activity as a Grounding meditation. He makes the point that there is no advantage to ordering the sequence – always going from inner physical experience to outer – the reverse (outer to inner) is as effective. In practicing this he asserts the same effect as is found in psychotherapy. “Emotional balance is established or restored, clear thinking is promoted, and confusion and other difficulties with thinking clear up. Encouraging ourselves to stay grounded also supports relaxed healthy living, promotes aliveness and vitality, helps us to deal calmly and effectively with difficult people or situations, releases stress, helps us to solve all sorts of personal problems, and promotes our staying steady even when challenged strongly” (Mellor P.78 (2011)). He then goes on to suggest something more “Through grounding we connect to ‘who we are’ by our direct inner experiences balancing with our connection to the outside world through our senses. All our energies—bodily, feeling, thinking and spiritual—are digested and integrated” (Mellor P.78 (2011)). He suggests something more than psychological knowledge and ease of living might emerge through the cultivation of bodily awareness.

I want to deepen the discourse that Mellor provides on bodily awareness or grounding by returning to the meaning I attached to meditation at the beginning of this paper. Earlier I said that for me a distinctive feature of meditation is its concentration and contemplation on identity. Central to both psychotherapy and meditation is embodiment and central to both is awareness. However there are also very distinctive differences in this awareness. Both clients and meditators are asking the question “Who Am I?”. The client utilises bodily awareness to develop their answer to this question. In his personal therapy his attention to his physical experience enables him to review and integrate a

whole range of experiences that results in the construction of a new identity. The answer is almost always personal and psychologically unique – true to that person given their unique sequence of experiences.

The same inquiry from a meditational perspective similarly employs bodily awareness but arrives at the answer that he or she is awareness itself. This is very different to a process of psychological self definition. It is an answer in which there is a distinct absence of psychology or uniqueness. The notion of personal identity dissolves. The “I” asking the question “Who Am I?” disappears. An understanding is found that what I observe I am. In those moments where the body is noticed through inner sensation, combined with the use of the outer senses, your awareness that you are knowing and being, inextricably linked to body, leads people to realise that they are limitless, beyond time, causeless and free. Content becomes meaningless and the answer is found purely in being and knowing itself. And this is simply through the practice of noticing sensations in your body while at the same time noticing through your senses all that is around you.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion I am writing of two forms of embodied awareness. One is psychologically driven and can be developed in a psychotherapeutic experience that focuses on the relaxation into and cultivation of bodily experience. This embodied awareness is content based, continually changing and is essentially a process of psychological self-definition. It is what Berne means by the development of awareness as a constituent part of autonomy (Berne 1964). The second form also arises from acknowledgement of the body and is often linked to meditation. It results in the realisation that we are awareness itself and that that awareness is formless, timeless and causeless, never changing. It is always present and the knowing and understanding of which is profoundly liberating.

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Robin Hobbes BA CQSW CTA(P) TSTA(P) is co-director of elan training a Transactional Analysis training centre in Manchester.

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<sup>1</sup> There are well described qualifications for achieving this understanding that go alongside physical awareness. They involve the practice of discrimination, being dispassionate, cultivation of peacefulness and being endowed with a burning desire for freedom.