Beyond the Mechanistic Conception of the Body

"Attention is an essential aspect of consciousness. In fact, it governs what we are conscious of, and therefore plays a part in the coming into being of whatever exists for us." – Iain Mcgilchrist

When we are disconnected from our body we are disconnected from the world, we lose our felt experience, and the reality of our interconnectedness. From this disconnection many negative afflictions arise because of feeling isolated. When one attempts to dominate their body, subject it to their conceptual "will," this disconnection grows greater. The reality is that we are interconnected beings, our body is not a "thing" separate from our mind but is a complex system working interdependently with the mind and the environment. To realize this somatically, opens the door to new movements and frees one from habitual, limiting patterns both mentally and physically.

When one investigates the body, one finds the mind and body exist in relationship. If one examines the body from the conceptual perspective, disembodied, one will perceive an object. The body and mind are in constant motion; the body and mind are not things at all but a process. To recognize this is the only way to really "know" the body. The felt experience is the body, not the conceptual model. They only way to know the body is through the direct experience.

We can begin our inquiry with the understanding that the mind and body are in an interconnected relationship that is continually changing. The question then becomes how we enter into this relationship somatically. Let's consider thinking about hitting a tennis ball vs. standing on a tennis court and hitting a tennis ball with a racquet. It's rather obvious that thinking and doing something are entirely different experiences. Thinking about hitting a tennis ball requires a disembodied cognition or thinking, but hitting the tennis ball requires one's attention in the body. Even though we all understand the obvious differences, a confusion still exists. Most of the time people are living in disembodied overdrive, including athletes. Thoughts dominate our day and interrupt our experiences.

Let's consider a tennis player that is experiencing a slump, a time when they cannot concentrate and lose their ability to play at their normal performance level. This is a result of overthinking and not sensing, they are not embodied. Concentration or lack thereof is not the problem, rather it's how or what they are concentrating on. We think we must figure things out and this translates to understanding something cognitively, which is a huge mistake for the athlete. Thoughts are not reality, they are snapshots of reality, the reality is in the embodied experience. Thinking should be used to enhance and serve the embodied experience. Embodiment is the master, and the thinking is the servant. When this relationship gets turned around confusion and frustration follow.

It's helpful if one knows the different functions of the mind. The mind performs two basic functions, thinking and directly experiencing. The directly perceiving consciousness is an embodied awareness without the conceptual filter. Thinking and perceiving are two different

modes of knowing or ways of acquiring knowledge. Each mode gives one a completely different perspective. The conceptual mind does not take the body as its object, it takes thoughts as its object. On the other hand, the perceiving mind takes the body as its object. For instance, if the object is encountered by one of the five senses, then the object is directly perceived without thoughts. Its only mental consciousness that cognizes. Cognition is used to interpret the direct experience.

When one grabs a tennis ball, the body senses the shape, the felt sensation of the material, and the weight of the object. This is the embodied experience. Then following the embodied experience with the object, the mental consciousness interprets it and labels it as a tennis ball. The mental consciousness can also make distinctions and preferences about the object, none of which the five-sense consciousnesses do. When we reflect upon the mind-body relationship in ordinary experience it's the conceptual mind that typically dominates our experience. The conceptual mind breaks things into parts, captures moments in time, categorizes, and compares things to make "sense" of things, but it is incapable of directly perceiving the present moment. Our mental consciousness is a very limited consciousness where the body is not primary.

When our thoughts govern our behavior there is an imbalance. Thoughts are only meant to provide information for the directly perceiving mind or the embodied experience, however this relationship gets inverted for various reasons. The result is a disembodied being, riddled with anxiety out of touch with their environment. The conceptual world view is disembodied, relies on mechanistic, reductionistic, and analytic ways of perceiving. Our concepts present as still shots of reality, much like a photograph. Concepts are information about the present moment, but they are not taking place in the present moment. The conceptual mind is not designed to capture the present moment. The conceptual mind presents a severely limited view of the world. Phenomena don't exist in isolation and do not have the solid boundaries thoughts would lead one to believe. The only way to perceive the body as a dynamic process is through the directly embodied state, not through the conceptually disembodied state.

Thoughts cannot get rid of thoughts. Once one's mind begins to race trying to stop or fix the unwanted thoughts to regain composure will not work. What one needs to do is switch from conceptual to physical awareness. If one cannot accomplish this, then one will continue to be stuck in the mind-body dualistic state. We can see this time and time again as tennis players crumble on the court in the middle of a match unable to regain their composure. Even players that have been trained by top coaches and sports psychologists, cannot regain their composure once they begin to overthink. This is because they are trying to solve the negative self-talk with positive self-talk, it doesn't work. It's like trying to remove a mustard stain by pouring more mustard on it. This is the mechanistic model of the body that the conceptual mind continues to glorify, it's the servant trying to do the job of the master. The conceptual mind is not able to relinquish control so it continues to tell us that there is a solution to the problem conceptually, however this cannot be, for it's the conceptual mind that has created the problem.

The direct experience is the embodied state. Direct experiences are embodied states where the mind is focused on bodily sensations, not the thoughts. The direct sense perceivers engage and

perceive raw sensory data prior to any conceptual distortion, meaning that each of the five senses directly perceive objects by way of their physical apparatus without thoughts. Therefore, a direct perception is a clear interaction with an object without the interference of a mental image.

Phenomena are changing continually. Thus, their reality is one of change or process, and this is exactly what the conceptual mind is unable to capture. Phenomena don't exist in isolation and don't have the solid boundaries thoughts would lead one to believe. All objects are made up of parts, and one must keep this in mind when working with the body. When we talk about the body we are talking about a verb, a dynamic process. Through this realization one discovers that the body cannot be grasped conceptually, but only experienced directly.

Since the mind and the body are impermanent, they are changing moment to moment. To be in accord with this continual flux is the desired outcome of practice and how one learns about the mind-body complex. Movement in this state is free and spontaneous. Directly experiencing the body is a result of long-term mind-body training. The mind and body have always existed in a nondual state therefore there is nothing to "fix" or "build," it's simply a question of recognition.

Embodied practices teach us how to develop the integrated mind-body process. The practices require constant concentration on the felt experience which results in a heightened awareness that increases over time. Embodied practices begin by cultivating physical and mental stillness until the embodied state is firmly established and then strengthened. Once an internal integration has taken place in stillness, one will begin to move from within the embodied state.

To move or compete athletically in the embodied state, you must be able to maintain it for prolonged periods of time. In athletics this is called, "being in the zone." When a person is engaged in an activity, uninterrupted by thoughts, this is the zone or maintaining an embodied state of being. The zone is not a thing, it cannot be conceptualized, only experienced, thus it relies on the embodied state.

As one's awareness continues to increase, one will begin to attune to and integrate with environmental forces. Therefore, the perception from the embodied state reveals to us the continuity between the body and the environment. In the embodied state, it becomes possible to sense the materiality of environmental forces. For instance, forces cannot be conceptualized but only experienced; thus, deeper levels of embodiment are required to directly perceive them. Neither sensation nor gravity can be seen, however, both are tangible determiners of movement. The learning process involves the learner's active engagement in the embodied state and negotiation of the resistances of their surroundings.

While body techniques are often discussed detached from their environment, the embodied somatic practitioner is always in relationship with it. The practitioner interacts creatively and repeatedly with the physicality of the environment. This process involves both the shaping of the body as one begins to experience the emergence of a common medium, physical forces of the universe that pervade and govern both the body and the environment. This is an entirely

new way of being in the world. At this point, learning will take place in the embodied state, this is referred to as enskillment. The anthropologist, Tim Ingold, defines enskillment as “a type of learning that is inseparable from doing, meaning individuals become more actively self-regulating in performance through deepening their attentiveness to environmental features.”

Let’s consider running around the tennis court. This requires one to cut, stop suddenly, and change directions throughout the match. The only way one can get better is to do it, feeling how the body handles the forces. The more one practices, the stronger the body gets, the greater the ability to handle the forces. All this is learned in the embodied state. One must be embodied to feel the interconnectedness of the body and the forces as one single process. In this embodied state there is no body, no court, no thoughts, only process.

Even though one may cultivate the embodied state, one will still want to continue to upgrade their concept of the body. The more a practitioner places themselves in the embodied state new experiences will continue to unfold and a deeper, fuller sense of the body will continue to emerge. Following those embodied states, one consciously integrates the experiences into the conceptual framework thereby changing the conceptual model of the body. Those new concepts, based on the embodied experience, are the upgraded conceptual model. Therefore, one does not disregard or deny the conceptual mind but matures it in relationship with the direct experiences one has in the embodied state. Each time the practitioner seeks out the embodied state the concept will line up closer with the actual experience.

Through embodied practices the cognitive mind is allowed to subside, and one experiences the body directly, as process. The body is not a concept, it’s a living process that cannot be pinned down through conceptualizing, and that is the realization that comes again and again during prolonged embodied states. Overtime, one comes to the realization that the conceptual consciousness is completely incapable of knowing the body. The body can only be experienced but not known conceptually.

When we are disconnected from our body we are disconnected from the world. When we live disembodied, we lose our felt experience, the reality of our interconnectedness and interdependence. From this disconnection many negative mind states arise because of feeling isolated, cut off from the whole. When one attempts to dominate their body, subject it to their conceptual “will” the mind body spilt only grows greater further cutting oneself off from the embodied experience. The reality is we are interconnected beings, our body is not a “thing” separate from our mind but is a continual process of many interconnected fluid systems working interdependently with the mind and our environment. To realize this somatically opens the door to new movements and frees one from habitual, limiting patterns. Embodied practices present new ways of being in the body and new ways of understanding that cannot be known by the conceptual mind. To cultivate the embodied state completely reorients the individual to the body not as a fixed thing but as a process.