BODYING

A new way of dealing with our negative thoughts and feelings

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Introduction

So-called “negative feelings” are simply feelings that we **negate** for one reason or another. We may negate them because we regard them as shameful or inappropriate, immature or childish, aggressive or unspiritual, unmasculine or unfeminine. Or simply because they are unfamiliar, unexpected or difficult to express in words.

Conventional psychological wisdom has it that we need to **express** negative feelings that burden or disturb us, to not “bottle them up” but “get them out of our system” — or else manage, discipline and if necessary **repress** them. Alternatively, we may be told that we need to analyse them, and discover their roots in childhood experience and trauma. If we don’t they will express themselves indirectly — we will act out our feelings by lashing out at others or by putting ourselves down.

**Bodying** means neither expressing nor repressing our feelings, analysing them or acting them out. It means simply giving ourselves time to **feel** our feelings in a purely **bodily** way, without expressing or repressing them, analysing them or acting them out, indeed without even naming them or being able to say what they are “about”. It is the mind that turns bodily feelings into feelings **about** something or about someone. It is the mind that gives feelings **names** like “hopeless”, “furious”, “terrified”. Nobody feels that life is “hopeless” for example. Instead they feel **as if** life were hopeless. But this “as if” is the work of the mind, perceiving a feeling metaphorically, turning it into a feeling “about” life, and giving it a name. But feelings **about** are the work of the mind — they are felt **thoughts**.

Step 1 — differentiating *thought and feeling*

We feel with our bodies not our minds. But our minds quickly pick up on feelings, interpreting them as felt thoughts — feelings about ourselves and our lives. When people are asked what they are “feeling” orhow they “feel” about something they are really being asked to name their feelings mentally and to describe their **felt thoughts**. **Felt thoughts** can carry intensively emotional charge, negative or positive — but it is created by their mental component. The first principle of **bodying** is to clearly distinguish mind and body, thoughts and feelings. This allows us to separate the purely mental component of our felt thoughts from their feeling dimension.

This first step in bodying is the essence of all the following steps, which are really only ways of achieving this clear differentiation of mind and body, thought and feeling, and through it learning to act in new ways — to discover our **will**.

Step 2: mental awareness of *thoughts*

Strange though it may seem, most people are not aware of their thoughts. When they think, they think about something — their awareness is focused on **what** they are thinking about — the “object” of their thought — and not the thought itself. All day we have thoughts **about** things and about people, about ourselves and others. We may so identify with these thoughts **about** reality that we mistake them **for** reality, and are not even aware of them **as** thoughts — even though they may be felt thoughts, imbued with strong emotional charge. To separate thoughts and feelings we must be able to switch our focus from what we are thinking or talking about to the thinking process itself, becoming aware of the thoughts we have **as** thoughts. This means **hearing** them as mental words and phrases in our minds, before we express them in words or act on them. Awareness of thoughts develops by listening to our mental speech and mental voices.

Step 3: bodily awareness of *feelings*

We feel feelings with our bodies not our minds. Awareness of the purely mental component of our **felt thoughts** allows us to feel the feeling component in a purely bodily way. As with thoughts however, feeling feelings does not mean intensifying a feeling we have about something or someone. The focus is on the feeling itself as we experience it in our bodies and not on its object. To be aware of feelings in this bodily way does not mean “suffering” them as moods or disturbing emotions. We suffer feelings when we do not allow ourselves to feel them, but instead turn them into **felt thoughts**. It is these felt thoughts that we then **fight** or **flee** from — or get so stuck in that we **freeze** emotionally, cutting ourselves off from all **bodily** feeling. If we become aware of our feelings in a bodily way we do not remain stuck in them — unless we are afraid of identifying with them. Then we feel them as independent energies arising in our selves from a part of our body, intruding into our minds or expressing themselves as psychosomatic symptoms. But by identifying with feelings in a way that lets them permeate our whole body, they become our own and we no longer experience them as uncontrollable psychological or somatic reactions “caused” by external events. **We** feel, not the body or mind. As a result we do not need to **change** them. Instead they begin to change **us** — changing into **other** feelings as they do so.

Step 4: forbearance

Bodying feelings allows us to **bear** them, not only in the ordinary sense but in the deeper sense of this word, which means not only to carry something but to be **pregnant** with it and give birth to it. Conversely, adopting a stance of **forebearance** allows us to body them, to carry and contain them physically as a mother carries and contains her unborn child in the womb. Forebearance does not simply mean stoically tolerating difficult feelings — “bearing up”. It means giving ourselves time to stay with them. If we do so they eventually **bear fruit**, giving birth to a new way of **feeling ourselves** and relating to others — a new **inner bearing** on life. It may take time for this new sense of ourselves to mature, for its source is an as-yet **unborn** aspect of ourselves, one for which we do not yet have a name or which we may previously have identified with someone else. Once we have recognised it, it may also take time to give birth to this feeling. This means finding ways of embodying and expressing it, integrating it with other aspects of our personality — our inner family of selves — and meeting its needs in our everyday life and relationships.

Summary

The first three steps of **bodying** can be summarised by a single acronym:

**D.AWN.** = **D**ifferential **AW**are**N**ess

The awareness is both mental and bodily, differentiating bodily feelings and the mental words with which we interpret them in thought. The fourth step, based on forbearance **is** the “dawning” of new feelings and thoughts from the old, based on feeling ourselves in a new way. This is facilitated by **forbearance**, which can be considered a fourth instinctual response — beyond **flight, flight and freezing** — trying to eliminate, control or avoid “negative” thoughts and feelings. These are actually **felt thoughts** — **unaware** feelings construed in thought and **unaware** thoughts registered in our feelings. The next three steps of bodying, however, lead us into the **will** and its source — our core values.

Step 5: following *felt impulses*

Through forbearance feelings and thoughts can be transformed into new **impulses** and **intuitions** respectively. Just as many mothers in pregnancy feel themselves in touch with their bodily needs and appetites, so does becoming pregnant with bodily feelings help us to be aware of our own impulses in a bodily way — whether an impulse to work or rest, talk or be silent, go out or stay in, eat or drink, do one task or do another. Making simple decisions by following **felt impulses** of this sort, helps to achieve more than we would normally do by just thinking about things, or forcing ourselves to do things in a definite order, whilst at the same time ensuring that we stay connected with our bodies and their needs. Feelings and thoughts can roam over past and future. Thoughts and feelings about things embrace past, present and future. Will and intent are always centred in the present moment, rooted in the question of what we feel impelled to do at any given time, rather in what we are thinking or having feelings about. Differential awareness and forbearance are what allow us to distinguish **felt impulses** from **impulsiveness**, habitual reactions and **fight-flight** responses.

Step 6: giving birth to *intuitive* *insights*

Following felt impulses is a further way of bodying the meaning of our feelings without having to formulate or analyse them. Normally, before we do something we need a mental reason for it. We ignore impulses that seem to be irrational — like going for a walk, or surfing the internet, when we have mentally planned to do some sort of work or vice versa. But by following our felt impulses instead of our purely mental and “rational” intents we may discover that these impulses possess an **inner rationality** of their own — leading to experiences, encounters and events that prove valuable in relation to our initial intents, and generating **intuitive insights**.

These are not insights we have before we follow our impulses and act, but insights generated by following our impulses — by acting on intuition. This is particularly important when in relation to the more complicated life issues and challenges that our negative feelings and thoughts were a response to in the first place. Coming to a deeper understanding of these “big” issues and making well-grounded decisions in response to them takes time. It requires that we first of all stop ourselves going round in mental-emotional circles, and give time for guiding impulses and insights to **incubate** within us. Learning to feel and follow our intuitive impulses in relation to smaller, everyday matters make us receptive to deeper feelings, intuitions and insights with a longer-term bearing on our lives. Turning these deeper **intuitive insights** into action also requires not only mental planning but step-by-step action timed and guided by **felt impulse**.

Step 7: spiritual awareness of core values

Behind our deepest fears and worst thoughts is the drive to **value fulfilment**. Values are another name for our innermost qualities and life-potentials, felt or unfelt, thought or unthought, born and fulfilled or still unfulfilled. If the striving to embody these inner potentials is frustrated, we feel negative and think negatively. But our negativity always carries its own truth, for even though it may give us a falsely gloomy picture of the facts of our lives, it reflects our **negative reality**. Negative reality is not what is there in our lives but what isn’t — what we don’t have or don’t desire, don’t feel or don’t expect. Negative psychology is not “caused” by something there, by genes or brain chemistry, other people or our environment, but is an expression of what isn’t there — of lack or loss. **Facts** are the positive reality of our lives — however we see them. Negative reality is important because it connects us with our core **values** rather than facts. If we feel loss it is because we value what we have lost or may lose.

If we lack something it is not because it is simply absent but because we value its presence. Values are themselves negative realities, not material facts but spiritual ones. For our inner potentials of being can never be fully translated into material facts, never be fully embodied or expressed in a single lifetime — but are no less real for that reason. The final step in bodying is the reward we reap from following the previous steps. This is a wordless inner awareness of our own core values, the spiritual dimension of our being that always transcends the material facts of our life. Aware of our core values we can begin to **appreciate** our own negativity of **thought** and **feeling**, which is a reflection of the ever-present **gap** between positive and negative reality, between factsand values. By re**minding** us of this gap our negativity can recall us to our own **will** — the will to em**body** more of our own inner potentials, to live more of who we **are**.