

Learning from the Wisdom of the Body by Viral Mehta

□Every time I watch it, I get goosebumps. The one-minute "Power of One" video combines evocative visuals of people who've impacted the world by working toward the greater good, inspiring us by their example. Gandhi. Mother Teresa. Ruby Bridges (the first black child to attend an all-white elementary school in 1960).

□It's amazing that our interpretation of experiences can generate such a visceral response. The fact that we get goosebumps when we are inspired or afraid is one of many everyday indicators of just how deeply and intricately connected our minds and bodies are. In fact, the mind and body are an intertwined whole -- and there is great wisdom in the totality of our mind-body experience.

□There are sparks of this recognition even in the world of technology. An increasing number of tools leverage something called "feedback loops." Some of these are bio-feedback devices that work by helping us become more aware of the body, giving us real-time feedback about physiological functions so that we can learn to consciously change them. They've been effective in improving many conditions, including stress, depression and even pain.

□But there are even more powerful feedback loops at work within ourselves. We are actually sub-consciously picking up on certain internal signals that orient us toward balance and optimal well-being. It's what, for instance, makes pregnant mothers naturally hungry for foods rich in the specific vitamins that they need. And it's this ability that allows us to, say, walk into a troubled meeting, and immediately sense that "the tension in the air is so thick you can cut it with a knife."

□There's a reason why we describe that tension as being palpable enough to cut. We can physically feel it. Most of the time, we think of the body as a mechanical system on auto-pilot, and we don't pay much attention to it. But if we sensitize ourselves enough, we can become aware of the body's aliveness. With every breath, the heart pumps fresh oxygen and blood, continually rejuvenating every part of the body. We know that every cell of our being is in flux, and a massively interdependent set of systems are at work constantly.

□But these aren't all strictly physical processes. We perceive and interpret through our minds, which in turn affect our bodies. The brain assembles neurohormones based on our emotional states, which get pumped into our bloodstream. And all of our cells have receptors for these chemicals, so we end up experiencing our mental states throughout our bodies. Though this process is constantly at play, we can go beyond being passive spectators to the whole phenomenon -- we can be active participants.

□ Think about how anger works. Let's say that my friend is supposed to meet me somewhere, and she is late. Initially, there's a mild feeling of annoyance. "She's always running late." That mild annoyance triggers a subtle, unpleasant, bodily feeling. But let's say I'm not aware of it. Beneath the surface, then, my habituated mental response kicks in, which only increases the intensity of that bodily feeling. The mild annoyance soon becomes full-fledged anger. So mind affects matter, which in-turn affects the mind, forming an unconscious cycle.

□ The body actually reflects the mind right away and can help lead us back to balance. Of course, it's not as simple as turning on a switch, but with practice, this "feedback loop" can start serving us. We can inject more choice into any situation. In every experience, we can learn to tune back into the ongoing stream of our inner experience, remain centered and choose our response. Even in simple things, like managing our emotional state when a friend is late.

□ This feedback loop goes well beyond just improving our physical health -- it points us to greater truths. At its core, it allows us to tap into our inherent drive, to keep improving and learning from our experiences, to continue evolving. The term "homo sapiens" comes from the Latin verb sapere, which means "to taste, to be wise, to know." Wisdom itself is defined by psychologists as the coordination of "knowledge and experience" and "its deliberate use to improve well being."

□ In fact, we are hardwired to grow in wisdom. Actively learning from our experiences is what makes us quintessentially human, and when this experiential learning is rooted in an integration of mind and body, we are leveraging a natural feedback loop. By using this built-in technology, we become better students of cause and effect, finding more and more windows of opportunity to be aware and to make better decisions. Best of all, this technology is a gift -- it requires no purchase, and can be activated at any time, waking us up to our own innate wisdom.