

# You and

How do you **feel**  
about your body?

Do you **like** your body?

Do you **listen** to it?

Do you **respect** and  
**appreciate** it?

# Your Body

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Your body is your life partner, the vehicle of your life energy from the moment of conception to the moment of death and, unlike an informal or formal marriage partnership, separation or divorce is not an option.

Consider the qualities needed for a healthy, cooperative couple relationship. The partners must communicate well with each other, listening with respect and trust and demonstrating appreciation, compassion, and forgiveness. When your body/mind partnership is out of balance and perhaps your body is producing symptoms of pain or disease, there is often a tendency to become impatient and angry with your body as if it had become an enemy. We speak of being a "victim" of disease and of having "a heart attack," as though the heart is on the offensive. Or a person may complain "my back is killing me," as if there was a war on between "me" and "my back." When you treat your body as an adversary, it cannot cooperate in the healing process. As in a dysfunctional marriage, hostility and blame cause distancing and disrupt the communication necessary for positive change to take place. By treating your body as a friend and listening to it with an attitude of appreciation and compassion, even though you may be experiencing physical "problems," you can begin to develop integrative qualities that will allow body, mind, and spirit to function with wholeness and optimal health.

## Awareness is the Key

So how do you learn to listen to your body? The key is awareness – awareness of being alive, and awareness of how you are using your body and your energy at any given moment.

Awareness involves focusing the mind on the body and noticing when you are out of balance or holding unnecessary tension. There will always be some tension in the body as muscles are activated in the process of standing, walking, eating, and performing everyday tasks; however, much energy is wasted when there is contraction of muscles not needed for the task at hand. For example, many people experience tightness in the jaw and shoulders when they are concentrating. You cannot relax unless you are aware of tension. Awareness of unnecessarily contracted muscles gives you the chance to release tension and free the flow of energy in your body. Similarly, if you notice that your breathing is tight and shallow, you will have the choice to take a deep breath, filling up your lungs and increasing your intake of life-giving oxygen.

Awareness provides the opportunity for change. A good time and place to begin the practice of awareness is when you are driving your car. Notice how you are sitting and whether you are out of balance, perhaps leaning back or leaning forward with tension in the back of your neck. Do you need to adjust the position of your driver's seat in order to find a comfortably balanced posture? Are your hands gripping the

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steering wheel with unnecessary strength? Is there tension in your arms and shoulders? Are your legs comfortably relaxed? Are you breathing freely? Just asking yourself these questions gives you the opportunity to change – to sit in a balanced position with elbows relaxed at your sides, letting go of tension in your legs, arms, and shoulders. By using this body awareness on a long drive, you can arrive at your destination feeling surprisingly fresh and comfortable.

Whatever you are doing during the day, at work, at home, or at recreation, you always have the opportunity to practice awareness. Whether you are sitting at a computer, walking, talking on the telephone, grocery shopping, brushing your teeth, or shampooing your hair, you can benefit from developing the habit of regularly checking in with your body. Notice when you are out of balance or squandering energy by using muscles that are unnecessary for the task you are performing. Shampooing your hair is a good example. There's a temptation to tightly close the eyes and tense all the muscles of the face while massaging your scalp. Once you become aware of this, you can think of standing under a tropical waterfall and letting the water wash away the tension from those facial muscles. By doing this you are not only allowing yourself to enjoy what might otherwise be a routine chore, you are also conserving your vital energy.

What is this mysterious vital energy that animates your body and makes possible your conscious existence? In ancient China, Taoist philosophers taught that everything in the universe is made of energy – a concept now confirmed by modern nuclear physics. Taoists called the universal energy Qi (pronounced "chee"), and they observed that nothing in the universe can exist without its opposite. For example, darkness only exists in relation to light, contrac-

tion as opposed to expansion, cold can only be appreciated in contrast to heat, or small understood by comparison with large. These opposites are called yin and yang qualities. They are inseparably connected and it is the relationship between the two that makes existence possible. Human beings receive both yin and yang energy at the moment of conception – yin energy from the female egg and yang energy from the male sperm. Ancient Chinese physicians developed a system of medicine based on the belief that illness is a result of the body energy being blocked or out of balance. To maintain health, they practiced various forms of "Qigong" (pronounced "chee gong" meaning "energy work") designed to free up the flow of Qi energy in the body and balance the yin and yang qualities. Awareness is a basic principle of all Qigong systems which include a number of forms of T'ai Chi. There are a great many different kinds of Qigong practice involving varying degrees of complexity; however, all forms teach practitioners to connect with and balance their body energy and, by doing so, to connect with the surrounding energy of the universe. Learning to become more aware of your body and more appreciative of the gift of your vital energy can be a powerful form of preventive medicine and a tool for self-healing.

## The Body Awareness Survey

The Body Awareness Survey (in the box on the next page) is a simple tool you can use to begin to develop awareness of your own Qi energy and the healing potential of an enhanced mind/body connection. The survey involves lying on your back or sitting comfortably, closing your eyes and moving your mind through different areas of your body with the aid of breath and visualization. It can be done at any time of the



day or in bed at night when sleep is evasive.

Begin by becoming aware of your feet, using your out-breath to imagine sending a warm wave of relaxation into them. Consider that each foot contains 26 delicate bones, all held together with muscles and tendons which coordinate in a marvelous way to connect you with the earth and allow you to walk and drive your car. Send your feet a message of appreciation, then slowly let the attention move up your legs, through calves, knees, and thighs to your buttocks and pelvis, thinking "letting go, letting go."

Breathe deeply and imagine all the organs inside your body relaxing (you may even hear affirming gurgles from your digestive system). As you think of sending breath energy to all your vital organs, feel a sense of awe and gratitude as you remember that your body is performing an incredible number of amazingly complex processes every moment of your existence. Every 24 hours, your lungs automatically take in more than 16 thousand breaths to oxygenate your blood and your heart beats about 100 thousand times to circulate the blood through your

# Appreciate Your Amazing Body

## 1. FEEL YOUR PULSE

Your heart beats about 100 thousand times a day, circulating blood through your body. Your body contains eight pints of blood. Within a tiny droplet of blood, there are some five million red blood cells, 300 thousand platelets, and 10 thousand white cells. About 400 gallons of blood flow through your kidneys in one day. Placed end to end, all your body's blood vessels would measure about 62 thousand miles.

## 2. NOTICE YOUR BREATH

You breathe about 20 times per minute, more than 10 million times per year. The surface area of the lungs is roughly the same size as a tennis court. Your left lung is smaller than your right lung to make room for your heart. You lose two cups of water a day through breathing. This is the water vapor you see when you breathe onto glass.

## 3. FEEL YOUR SKIN

Each square inch of your skin contains four yards of nerve fibers, 100 sweat glands, three million cells, and three yards of blood vessels.

## 4. BLINK YOUR EYES

You blink your eyes about 20 thousand times a day. An eyelash lives about 150 days before it falls out. Each of your eyes has 120 million rods, which help you see in black and white. Each eye has six million cones, which help you see in color.

## 5. SMILE

You use about 17 facial muscles for a smile and about 43 for a frown. It is estimated that 2,000 frowns create one wrinkle.

body. Move attention to your lower back and then slowly up your spine, bringing warmth and relaxation up to your shoulders and then down both arms, through elbows and wrists to the tips of your fingers. Feel the energy in your hands. Each hand contains 27 bones, over 100 ligaments, 34 muscles, 48 nerves, and 30 arteries. Remember all the ways in which you use your hands and consider how difficult your life would be without them. Let the awareness move slowly back up the arms to your shoulders, allowing your arms to relax and feel soft and heavy.

From your shoulders, feel warmth and relaxation moving up the neck and into the head, softening your jaw, tongue, cheeks, and eyes. Placing the tip of your tongue lightly on the roof of your mouth will help to relax your jaw and the muscles of your face. Imagine the flow of warmth moving up through your forehead and flowing into the scalp. You may even feel a tingling in your scalp as you continue to think

"letting go." Then imagine a pleasant, cool breeze flowing through your mind, clearing away busy thoughts, bringing calmness, clarity, and peace. Stay with this feeling as long as you wish, breathing gently, and when you are ready to return to outer awareness, open your eyes remembering that you can take that feeling of wholeness and clarity with you into the activities ahead or into refreshing sleep.

Adapt this survey to suit your own needs and practice it as a sort of meditation, remembering that each time you do it you are giving yourself a gift. Taking action to become more relaxed, grounded, and aware is not only a gift to yourself but can be a gift to those around you because your relatives, friends, and coworkers will notice the difference. And consider the possibility that by reducing your own tension and finding inner peace, you are, in a small way, contributing to the creation of a healthier and more balanced world.

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*Wendy Helms, Ph.D., has a long-standing interest in the body/mind connection and did her doctoral research on the relationship between stress and disease. She taught in the Graduate Psychology program at JFK University for 13 years and is now an accredited teacher of T'ai Chi Chih®. Wendy is also a hobby beekeeper and can be contacted at [intobeeing@comcast.net](mailto:intobeeing@comcast.net) or by phone at 925-254-9683. Some sources for more information about T'ai Chi: [www.taichichih-norcal.org](http://www.taichichih-norcal.org); [www.taichichih.org](http://www.taichichih.org); and [www.worldtaichiday.org](http://www.worldtaichiday.org).*