

Re-Imagining Your Body

through playful exercise

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PREFACE

WORDS BEFORE THE JOURNEY

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A book is only truly worth reading if reading it changes you in some way. Otherwise you are just passing the time (though hopefully pleasantly) which would have passed anyway. This may be a small-scale change, such as when you acquire a new skill or discover a new field of knowledge or where you are stimulated to think new thoughts. Or, much more rarely, it may be utterly transformative, the kind of change suggested at the beginning the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, when the sage Vyasa says that if you listen carefully to this story, “in the end you will be someone else”.

What does *Re-Imagining Your Body* offer you? And how might this change you?

It offers you a journey.

Any journey entails a change of place. But a true journey is much more transformative than that.

Within the very broad field of ‘self-help’ literature, there are many books that make big promises – promises of career success, an end to anxiety, increased happiness, and such like. These are all *destinations*. Of course, such goals cannot be attained merely by wishing them true and in that sense you undertake a kind of journey here too, in the simple sense that you have to do something. But such journeys are not intrinsically satisfying or fulfilling; they are merely the means to the all-important end. For this reason, such books often stress how simple and quick the journey to the goal is. Hardly worth the name ‘journey’ at all, in fact.

In the modern world more generally, the journey – taken literally – has been supplanted by travel. Travel is mass produced. What were once the possibilities of new insights and even adventures on the way have been replaced by minor variations in the stock of duty-free shops and occasional anxieties about getting through security on time.

Even so, we all still have a deep-rooted sense of what a true journey is. Konstantinos Kavafis' great poem "Ithaka" explores this sense. It begins (in my own translation from the Greek) like this:

As you set out for Ithaka
wish for a long journey, one
filled with the unforeseen, full of seeing.

The island of Ithaka was the homeland of the Greek hero Odysseus, to which he set sail following the Greek army's capture of Troy. But it took him ten years to get home, with many weird and wonderful adventures on the way which form the main plot of Homer's *Odyssey*. Kavafis takes this as a model of the kind of journey which is, in a strange way, more important than the destination. Nevertheless without that (or without some) destination there could be no journey. The poem ends:

Keep Ithaka in mind always.
To arrive there is your destination.
But don't rush the journey, not in the slightest.
Better to take many years
even to arrive there in old age
rich with all you have gained from the voyage
not expecting riches from Ithaka.

Ithaka gave you the wonderful journey.
Without her, you would not have set out.
But she has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her faded, Ithaka will not have
deceived you.
As wise as you'll have become, with so much behind
you,
You'll have understood by now what Ithaka means.

By the time you arrive at Ithaka, that is, you will have realized that what Ithaka, your destination, truly promised you was the journey to it.

As I've said, *Re-Imagining Your Body* offers you a journey. 'Ithaka' in this case can be described as a positive transformation of your

relationship to your body, one through which you will attain greater presence, poise, confidence... above all greater awareness of and access to your psychophysical potential.

But the journey – that which really matters – is a journey of discovery of the many dimensions of *your body-as-you*.

It's not an intellectual journey, but a practical one. In a sense, it's your body – or rather, it's *you as your body* – that needs to *re*-discover itself, something which cannot possibly happen 'in the mind' alone. But as you'll see, this involves the whole of you. Above all, it requires the full participation of your imagination.

Before you set out, I'll try to clarify a little in the Introduction what 'your body-as-you' means and how the playful exercises in the rest of the book will help you discover it, to provide a kind of map of the journey to come.

INTRODUCTION

YOU ARE YOUR BODY

INTRODUCTION: YOU ARE YOUR BODY

If we want to change something for the better, we may well need to ‘work on’ it (in the common phrase). We can ‘work on’ a wide variety of things, such as on our French, on our marriage, on our self-esteem, on our soufflés.... Among these many things, some involve relationships, either with others (as in working on our marriage) or with ourselves (as in working on our self-esteem).

In fact I’m not entirely comfortable with the slightly puritanical phrase “to work on,” but let that pass for the moment. Here I want to ask: among the relationships that you can usefully work on, is one *your relationship to your body*?

Not to work *on your body*, mind, but *on your relationship to it*. You can do the former in the gym. The latter can only happen in some sense ‘inside you’.

I’ll guess that this idea – that it may be a good idea to work on your relationship to your body – probably doesn’t strike you as odd. After all, you might be one of the many people who have a less than easygoing relationship with their bodies. But perhaps it should strike you as odd.

You see, *you are your body* – even if you don’t fully realize that fact. You don’t have a relationship to your body as you might have to another person (which is the trap poor Narcissus fell into when he fell in love with his own image). Nor do you have a relationship to your body as you might have to an object you possess or own (which is a trap that many others fall into). Nor do you even have a relationship to it as you might have to some specific aspect of yourself, such as your self-esteem. Since *you are your body* lock, stock and barrel, to work on your relationship to your body is to work on your relationship to yourself. That’s okay, it makes sense. But the key is this: *once you realize – fully realize – that that’s what it means, a significant part of the need for you to work on your relationship to your body disappears!*

It’s that simple – in theory, anyway. But at the same time it’s not so easy to realize, fully realize, in practice (in your everyday life, let’s say) that *you are your body*. I’ll outline the underlying reason

why this isn't easy a little later in this Introduction, since it's too deep an issue to delve into right at the start. For the moment it's enough to say that we can't easily *think* of ourselves as being our bodies unless we first learn to *experience* ourselves this way, where this is made difficult by a complex of powerful and deep-rooted cultural influences that serve to alienate us from our bodies, to make our bodies seem somehow 'other' than ourselves.

Such experience is the practical goal of this book.

As you progressively achieve not so much the experience that you are your body as the many rich and varied experiences that this consists of, you will find not only that your self-contentment and self-confidence are increased, but also that you discover physical – or better, psychophysical – resources that you never suspected. As you become more at one (literally) with your body, you will find your posture, your poise, your fluidity of movement, your energy level and your physical presence all enhanced (for these are all psychophysical, not merely physical). These are the 'payoffs'. But as I said in the Preface, it's the journey that matters – the encountering of and the deep learning from those many rich and varied experiences.

Re-Imagining Your Body is a book of exercises, along with some reflections upon them, which has the goal of transforming your relationship with your body. It's more a course in self-discovery than in self-improvement. But that's not the most important distinction here. In following this course, you're not going to try to 'improve' your body through *hard work* – you're going to extend your awareness of its reality and potential by re-imagining it through *play*. (This is why, a little earlier, I expressed reservations about the phrase "to work on".) As you'll discover, you will need the playful power of your imagination for this. It's your imagination – which I like to think of as a 'spiritual muscle' – that will bring you fully in touch with the nature of your *body-as-you* and help you discover the riches of truly *being your body*.

YOUR BODY-IN-THE-MIRROR

Right from the start, you must realize that 'you are your body' means much, much more than that *you are the body that others see*. This, your body-for others, is important. But almost certainly you identify it with your body-in-the-mirror, which, for you, is a detached and

externalised body. And the body-in-the-mirror is a ‘problem body’ for far too many people. This fact is worth examining.

Negative body-image is really a problem on two levels. On one obvious level, the body-in-the-mirror falls distressingly short, usually in several ways, of some learnt and internalized ideal. On another, deeper level, the body-in-the-mirror is *an object*. When you look in the mirror you don’t see the body you truly *live in*, nor even the body you *live through*; you see the body you have to *live with*. The deeper problem, then, is that whatever a person does to solve the problem on the first level not only doesn’t solve it on the second level, but, on the contrary, reinforces it on that second level too. She or he might manage to make some visible improvements, but only at the cost of increasing alienation from her or his body. This is true even for a person who manages to transform their body enough (as an object) to start to like it (as an object).

I’ll try to show more fully what this means, and how one might break out of the trap it involves, with the example of an exercise, which I’ll describe at some length. This will also give a preliminary idea of how the exercises in this book work and of the broader philosophy behind them. However, there’s no need for you really to do the exercise – in fact, it’s too advanced to be a starting-point for the programme, so it’s best that you don’t try to do it; all you need to do here is to follow its logic, to imagine or contemplate doing it. This will be enough for you to understand the point.

‘IMAGINARY BODIES’

Suppose, then, that you suffer from some degree of negative body-image and I tell you that I can solve your problem. “Great!” – you say (assuming you believe me) – “Tell me how!” Well, you’re going to need to use that spiritual muscle of yours, your imagination, in the following way....

One of the great actors and teachers of acting of the twentieth century was Michael Chekhov. Chekhov developed a kind of ‘trick’ by which an actor can become the character that they have to play. Once the actor has gained a good idea of the psychology of a character, they should imagine the *kind of body* such a character would ‘naturally’ have – ‘naturally’ in the sense of most appropriate to or expressive of that character’s psychology. Then, once the actor has imagined the character’s body with sufficient clarity and detail, their next step is to imagine it as their very own body. They should

imagine, that is, that they are inside the imaginary body of the character, which occupies much the same physical space as their own body, while they just get on with their own lives. After doing this for some time, while keeping a vivid sense of their new body, they find the character's psychology emerging and growing within them, taking them over. Thus they become the character!

This really does work. But apart from that, it's fun – a kind of game. It will help to make the game a bit more concrete with some examples. Following Chekhov's suggestion first: an awkward, slow-witted, rather inert person might be short, thickset, rather flabby, with a relatively large head and short, broad neck, with an upper body evidently burdened by gravity (Chekhov, 78). Alternatively, an energetic, dominating and judgmental person might have a slim, fairly rigid but forward-leaning torso, locked knees when standing, tense, narrow shoulders and a neck that turns briskly, but only in a 'sharp' way, with eyes that tend to flick sideways, being always on the lookout for threats and challenges. Or again, a sensual, self-indulgent but also warm and generous person might have a fairly full but 'well-distributed' figure, with mobile waist, active and expressive arms, and a tendency to tilt the head a little to the side when with others.

'Trying on' such imaginary bodies is a bit like trying on new clothes. Initially, you need simply to stand, to walk a few steps, to sit down... just to get the feel of them. Only gradually do they become *yours*. But you have to be very specific, for real bodies are distinctive in every aspect. It helps in this respect to distinguish between three different, but overlapping, levels:

- a) the actual physical qualities of the imaginary body (a short or a long neck, broad or narrow shoulders, a trim or a flabby waist, and so on);
- b) the character's physical way of relating to or 'inhabiting' that body (how the head is held, whether the shoulders are pulled back or rounded, whether the feet point outwards as the character walks...);
- c) physical mannerisms which seem to 'go with' the specific body, rather like accessories (a tendency to drum the fingers on the thighs, to touch the chin or cheeks, to stand with the weight on the left leg, and such like).

We'll just imagine here that you really did play this 'Imaginary Bodies' game for sufficient time, taking on several contrasting imaginary bodies and, most importantly, experiencing how they

made you feel. We'll also assume that you've had fun doing so. Now consider the following proposition:

The body-image, for the majority of people, is an imaginary body.

And it functions in exactly the same way, by 'taking over' one's psychology. So you see...

"But wait," you might well interrupt. "If my body-image is an imaginary body, surely it's the imaginary body that seems to fit most closely with what I feel about myself as a person. In this sense it *expresses* my psychology; it doesn't 'take over' my psychology in a way that transforms it."

I agree – up to a point. But this way of looking at it overlooks the strength of the *feedback* that's involved here, feedback that reinforces and almost certainly also amplifies everything negative in the way you feel about yourself. So you see (to pick up the thread)... instead of all that 'positive thinking,' telling yourself you've got deeper qualities, that you're a really interesting person, worth talking to... etc. etc., why not just imagine the 'new body' that goes with your target self-image and then take it on as yours! For keeps! After all, it's much cheaper than a full-body makeover.

"But if I do this," you ask, "what will happen when I look at myself in the mirror? Looking at imaginary bodies in the mirror wasn't part of your (or rather Chekhov's) game, was it? And I can see why not. Because it might have broken the spell."

I'll agree this far, that you shouldn't pick a 'new body' that's too obviously different from what you've got. So start from what you've got and enhance it. But in case you're thinking that imaginary bodies exist only 'in the mind' – in your imagination, that is – that's not true. A good actor, on stage, can look taller or shorter or thinner or fatter than they appear to be in real life, and something like Chekhov's trick is the way that they do it, even if they're not aware of that fact. Apart from that, your body-image is an imaginary body, as I've said, yet it's what you really do see in the mirror; it's not exactly what other people see when they look at you even though you imagine that it is.

Suppose now that I've convinced you that this might just work. Something – a doubt – still holds you back. What is it? Maybe you can't quite put it into words, but you still try:

"Playing this game seems like a lot of fun.... Using the same technique to transform my body-image seems a bit crude by comparison, a bit reductive...."

Exactly! Now we need to get past that little word 'fun'.

The fun of the game lies in discovering your *physical-imaginative potential*. Maybe you had thought that imagination was for day-

dreaming or fantasy, things that happen ‘in the head’ – and therefore don’t really happen. But playing this game reveals that your imagination can act within the physical world to transform it. Imagining a different body for yourself transforms your thoughts, your feelings, your desires, your impulses – your psychology, in a word – but the transformation doesn’t end there. Your ‘new’ psychology transforms your real body too – not its given physical characteristics, of course, but the way you relate to and use these, and to that extent it even changes your actual appearance.

So yes, you’re right – using this extraordinary power merely to overcome your negative body-image, by locking yourself into one new imaginary body, is crude and reductive.

Do you see what is happening here? You are taking a vital step beyond the *body-as-object*. You are discovering – or recovering – the *body-as-subject*. You are discovering the extraordinarily subtle – and subtly transformable – relationship that exists between your awareness of your body and your sense of self. And along with this you’re realizing that your awareness of your body – the body-awareness that truly matters – is much, much more than what you see in the mirror, and your sense of self is much, much more than your idea of how others see you. In short, you have gone beyond the problem of negative body-image.

And that, of course, is to solve it!

Still, apart from the fact that I only asked you to imagine playing this game, which means that you (probably) haven’t yet experienced the extraordinary transformative power of imagination in practice, I should also come clean and admit that I’m exaggerating – a little – for in reality such problems are not quite so easily solved. They are anchored too deeply in the socio-cultural mud. Even so, the story I’ve just outlined should be taken as a kind of parable-version of how the book as a whole works. In summary: *Re-Imagining Your Body* is fundamentally concerned with overcoming the alienation from the body that is so deeply entrenched in Western civilization and that lies at the root of so many of our discontents.

THE WESTERN ‘BODY-VIEW’

I began by focusing on body-image problems as familiar territory, but these are really just a symptom of a deeper malaise. To get a better sense of this, imagine two scenes. First, a group of medieval monks

flagellating themselves with scourges to ‘mortify their flesh’. Next, a group of people ‘working out’ in a modern gym with weights, treadmills, bicycle machines, rowing machines.... Technological progress apart, it’s pretty much the same thing – don’t you think?

But perhaps you don’t. Those medieval monks, you might object, were expressing a kind of hatred of the body. They wanted to suffer physically for the good of their souls. The gym-goers are prepared to suffer physically for the sake of their bodies. So it’s different.

‘No pain, no gain’ in both situations, but with very different types of (hoped for) payoff? That’s true – up to a point. But what I’ll call *the new asceticism* is paradoxical. While it idolizes the body even as it makes the body suffer – not only in the gym but through fasting (I mean diet plans), even by putting it under the knife – there is still a kind of ‘hatred of the body’ involved in it, a hatred of the body as it really, typically, normally, naturally is.

It helps to see things this way (while recognizing, of course, that there are still good reasons for keeping fit). You cannot be so in thrall to the ‘ideal body’ if you realize that this entails a form of hatred of the real thing, a hatred more culturally entrenched, hence more easily overlooked, than just *your own* dislike of *your own* body.

Up to a point, we can blame capitalism for this. Yes, I mean it! Modern capitalism badly needs your body-dissatisfactions and actively promotes them in all available ways in order to get you to part with your money. Again it helps to think of this in the right way. What you’re really being sold is not a range of body-enhancement tools and aids. What you’re really being sold is the illusion of power – of power over your body-for-others. But precisely in being sold this, you’re being stripped of real power, *the power to truly occupy your body as you*. In a word, you’re being *alienated* – not, as in the classic Marxist formulation, from the product of your labour, but from the true sensuous ground of yourself.

Nevertheless it’s only up to a point that we can blame capitalism, for capitalism needs to tap into a very deep-rooted and long-standing cultural attitude to the body in order to get away with its mass production of exploitable dissatisfactions. It’s easy to see that you’re being sold something. It’s more difficult to grasp how the body has been reduced to less than itself by a couple of thousand years of Western dualistic thinking. Within Western culture what is rightfully the body’s own has been ascribed instead first to the *soul*, second to the *mind*, and third to the *brain* (insofar as this gets distinguished, these days, from the body that serves to carry it around). In all these

variations on a theme the body is robbed of its potential fullness of being. Not only that, but ultimately it is robbed of *YOU* – for ‘you,’ in this world-view, are always defined as something more than your body; supposedly you are more your soul than your body, or more your mind than your body, or more your brain than your body (there’s also a pop version in which you’re more your personality than your body). Your body, thus, is reduced to something *you have*, and it is difficult to re-conceive it as something *you are*.

Capitalism can only sell you its tantalizing promises in relation to the body you have. It is powerless over the body you are.

HAVING A BODY / BEING A BODY

Now it’s time to return to the question that I left hanging earlier: Why is it not easy to realize that *you are your body*?

Suppose you see a beautiful horse in a field. It would be odd if you said, “That horse has a beautiful body!” Instead you say, much more simply, “That’s a beautiful horse”. But if you see a good-looking human being, you can say “That’s a beautiful man/woman,” but it seems equally possible and equally appropriate or right to say “S/he has a beautiful body”. So what’s the difference?

Human beings can think of themselves as *having* bodies and as *being* bodies. You might suppose that these are simply different ways of thinking about the same thing. But that’s not true. In one superficial sense the body *I have* and the body *I am* are the same thing – at least, they occupy the same space. But in another, deeper sense they’re very different things. The body *I have* tends more to the status of object. The body *I am* tends more to the status of subject. Both of these are valid ways of conceiving the body, provided that they’re both understood to be valid ways. *But within Western culture, the body I have has come to dominate and displace the body I am.*

The fundamental reason that we, as human beings, can think of ourselves as having bodies is that we can also think of ourselves as having minds. But thinking in this way has a tendency to set up – or to assume – a split between body and mind, in the simple sense that they appear to us as different things.

The trap this can and often does lead to is identifying the *mind* with the *self*. It’s as though the separation between body and mind that arises, when we think of these as things we have, in turn gives rise to a question: which of these, my body or my mind, is more truly or more fully what I am? (After all, the only alternative is that ‘I’ am

something other than the body or the mind that I have.) But this question should never have arisen. Identifying the mind with the self reduces the body to a kind of ‘accessory,’ albeit a necessary one. The body is now merely what carries the self around and carries out actions within the world in the interests of that self.

This conception is profoundly wrong and very damaging.

When I truly think of myself as *being* a body, I don’t – in fact, I can’t – think of myself as simultaneously *being* something else, that is, a mind. Instead, the body that I am contains the mind that I also am. But because of our habit of thinking of a body and a mind as things we ‘have,’ we may find it difficult to realize this, at least to realize it fully – not just intellectually, but in such a way that we experience it too.

Notice that this is not true the other way round. If I think that I am my mind, my mind does not seem to contain my body in the same way. This is the clue to the difference between body and mind as *concepts*, but not as *things* – for body and mind do not actually exist as different things, but only as aspects of the same thing.

The vast majority of us will readily accept that horses have subjective experiences, as we do, in other words that they are fully sentient creatures rather than automata that merely behave as if they are conscious. The body that the horse so simply *is* clearly contains this subjective, sentient, conscious life. We see the alert vitality, the sensitivity, the ‘charged awareness’ of *the body*. No problem! But human beings, it seems, are so entranced by the ‘little intelligence’ of the mind, which appears to them as what is so special about them, that they find it hard to think of themselves as being *embodied* in the full sense that Friedrich Nietzsche so rightly insists that we are. For Nietzsche, the body is in fact all that we are. The body, in his conception, is a ‘great intelligence,’ one which contains our ‘little intelligence’ (the mental or spiritual dimension of being human) within it. Most people, he suggests, are unfortunately so enthralled by the capacity of their ‘little intelligence’ to say ‘I’ that they fail to grasp that the body has a capacity that goes way beyond this – the capacity to *enact* or *perform* ‘I’ (Nietzsche, 61–2).

Many of the exercises in this book can be thought of as exercises in performing ‘I’.

For ‘I’ am not a consciousness, not even a self-consciousness, that sits somehow ‘inside’ my body in the way that a driver sits inside a car. ‘I’ exist, both consciously and self-consciously, as a *self* only in and through my embodied or bodily interaction with the world. ‘I’ am

*in my body, then, and nowhere else, not as anything distinct from it (a 'soul'... a 'personality'...), but in the *very subjectivity of my flesh* (for this is what I think Nietzsche means by the body's 'great intelligence').*

THE SPIRIT OF PLAY

These are big, serious issues. But *play* – don't forget, you're going to re-imagine your body *through play* – is serious too, in two ways. Firstly, it's serious because it has a function or purpose. As most child psychologists will tell you, play is essential to the child's acquisition of a wide range of physical, psychological and social skills. From the child's point of view, however, play is simply fun. It's a bit like sex. Sex is for reproduction. But sex is also for pleasure – or, better, for joy. The joy of sex, we might say, is the trick by which Nature gets us to reproduce. And the fun of play is the trick by which Nature gets the child to acquire all those necessary skills.

But not only the child. We can *all* learn through play at any stage of life.

Here, however, we should go an important step further. Play truly works as a way of acquiring skills when it is *not* done with that purpose. In other words, play truly works as a way of acquiring skills *only* when it is done 'just for fun'. That's not true of sex. Sex can function as a means of reproduction when engaged in joylessly for that purpose alone – as some religions have advocated.

Work, as the opposite of play, is that which we do consciously and deliberately to achieve certain goals; that is, enhancements or ameliorations or transformations of ourselves, our environments or our situations. If we're lucky, we'll get a lot of satisfaction through this too and this may feed back into our work, improving its quality. In principle, however, such satisfaction is incidental, not strictly necessary to the attainment of the goals of work.

But the fun of play is essential.

Still, you must take note of something important here. Young children take their play very seriously. This is the second sense in which play is serious. Such seriousness, through which the world of the game *displaces* the world which is not a game, is a precondition of the (right kind of) fun. (I say 'right kind' because there's an adult way of playing that is too conscious of 'merely playing' and which therefore generates fun of the wrong kind.)

The exercises in this book should be carried out in the spirit of play. They will work much better if you enjoy doing them. This means

you need to take them seriously in the sense of giving yourself over to each exercise for its own sake, and this, in turn, will prevent you ‘end-gaming’ (anticipating the desired result), which tends to be self-defeating. However, it doesn’t mean you need to make any conscious effort to forget the goals of the exercises. That should just happen as you give yourself to or enter into the exercise itself.

PLAYFUL EXERCISE

Earlier, I asked you to follow the logic of ‘Imaginary Bodies’. As an exercise, ‘Imaginary Bodies’ makes a demand on your imagination but not on any physical resources such as strength or stamina or flexibility or balance. Please don’t get the wrong idea from this. Many of the exercises in this book will make physical demands on you, and they will help you develop and extend your physical resources in the process. They count as true ‘physical exercises’. But almost all the exercises will ask you to use your imagination as an essential part of the exercise. This is what makes them ‘playful exercises’.

Broadly, we can distinguish three types of, or ways of doing, physical exercise:

MINDLESS EXERCISE is where you can still perform the exercise adequately even if your mind isn’t in it, in the sense that it’s free to go off wandering somewhere else. You might be on an exercise bike or a treadmill, or doing push-ups, working very hard, while thinking about what you’ve got to do later at work or what to wear for the next date. This is more likely where the exercise involves repeating the same movements over and over again.

Mindless exercise has its place. But you need to understand its limitation: the fact that it enhances only what we can call the *mechanical* functions of the body.

MINDFUL EXERCISE is where your mind must be ‘in it,’ in the sense of fully concentrated and focused on what you’re doing, for the exercise to be maximally effective. All stretching exercises are like this. So are martial arts. And weight lifting.

By definition, mindless exercise doesn’t become more effective when done more mindfully. But there’s an important exception to this: when you need to improve your technique (which can apply even to something as natural as walking), then you need to focus mentally on what exactly your body is doing.

Mindful exercise, of course, is good for the ‘mind’ as well as for the ‘body’. It is really a kind of *meditation-in-movement*.

PLAYFUL EXERCISE also requires your mind to be ‘in it’ in order to be effective. But whereas many properly mindful exercises can be done (badly) in a relatively mindless way, it’s simply not possible to carry out playful exercise without the full involvement of your mind. This involvement is not simply concentration and focus, nor even visualization; it’s the exercise of your *creative imagination*. A few examples will communicate the kind of thing this means. You might walk while imagining an elastic rope attached to the top of your head and to the sky, which is tending to lift you off the ground, so that your steps must include the effort to stay grounded. You might relax while standing upright by imagining that your body is a skeleton, which therefore cannot have any muscular tension and which stays standing purely because of way the bones are balanced on top of each other. (Feel the wind blow through you!) You might imagine playing in the sea, feeling the resistance of the water as you stir and swish it with different limbs until you feel that you have become the sea, that it’s not just all around you but actually flowing through and in you.

Only playful exercises can help you transform your relationship to your body and get much more fully back inside it.

Playful exercises can also have very beneficial effects on a wide variety of physiological functions: balance, flexibility, coordination, energy level, even stamina.... But they are not a universal panacea. For all-round health and fitness it’s best to practice them alongside other exercises specifically designed to enhance aerobic capacity and muscle strength, as well as in combination with *yoga* or *tai chi* or *qigong*. This, by the way, will help you get more out of your playful exercises too. And you should find that you can enhance the effectiveness (and pleasure) of many ‘normal’ exercises by adding an element of imagination to them.

YOUR BODY-AS-A-WHOLE

Another vital distinction needs to be made here. Your body consists of parts. But it is also a whole – and as a whole it is *more than the sum of its parts*. Some kinds of exercises, especially mindless ones, focus on specific body parts. Playful exercises, in contrast, tend to focus on (or at least consciously to involve) the whole body. Crucially, becoming one with your body, such that you experience it *as you*, simply cannot

happen at the level of the part. It cannot even happen at the level at which the whole is just the sum of the parts.

At the end of this Introduction you will find a simple exercise to make you more aware of your-body-as-a-whole.

The majority of exercises in this book require you to ‘tune in to’ and ‘listen to’ your body-as-a-whole, whether or not they explicitly refer to the need for such whole body awareness. Hence you should always try to be sensitive to the complex interconnectedness of your body. Above all, do not think of your body as a machine! In a machine, part A impacts part B, part B impacts part C, part C impacts part D, and so on. But your body is much more like a tightly bundled network or web of links, pathways, associations, reflections and echoes.

Of course, this is not to say that you can or should forget about the parts. On the contrary, developed whole body awareness is necessary for fully effective use of the parts. You’ve probably seen those performers who imitate robots. The technique they use is called *isolation* – the isolation of one body part from the rest. Thus they turn themselves into ‘machines’. The paradox is that they could not do this without a highly developed awareness of the body-as-a-whole. The same is true, perhaps in a more obvious way, of belly dancers, who also use the technique of isolation.

THE BODY'S SELF-AWARENESS

Through the exercises in this book you will also be training two senses that are not normally given much conscious attention – at least not among those who are not professional performers or athletes. These are your *kinaesthesia* and your *proprioception*. Kinaesthesia is internal awareness of the body’s movement. Proprioception is internal awareness of the body of a more general kind, including its placement, balance and condition. There will be no need to think about these things as you perform the exercises (and I won’t refer explicitly to them in describing the exercises), but it’s useful to understand why they matter.

They matter, above all, because they are *principal ways of being inside your own body*.

Ballet dancers often train using mirrors in which they can check their position, posture and alignment. Some research suggests that the use of mirrors in training can contribute to negative body-

image among dancers. This, in turn, raises the question of whether or not mirrors are truly necessary for the technical aspects of such training. Ballet, of course, is a very strict and demanding discipline and it's the case that, for many people, even trained ballet dancers, proprioception and kinaesthesia are insufficiently fine-tuned to ensure the required precision.

But for you, in performing the exercises in this book, it would be *wrong, wrong, wrong !!!* to do any of them looking in a mirror.

Because they require you to *search within*.

Just as in some kinds of 'depth psychology' you can benefit from digging deep into what is usually called your unconscious mind and bringing its contents more into consciousness, so you will benefit from digging deep into your 'unconscious body' to render it more conscious, more aware, more sensitive and more fully 'alive to itself'. No mirror can help you with this.

Through the exercises you will also find that your imagination becomes 'fitter' – that is, sharper and more vivid – though you do nothing to train it.

Here, however, I must give a warning. If you had in fact tried the 'Imaginary Bodies' exercise described earlier, it's possible that you might have imagined having a new and different body in the wrong way. To understand this, try a simple experiment: close your eyes and imagine that you're either much slimmer than you are or much fatter. Take enough time to fully experience this.

Now, having done that, did you: a) *feel that you were inside a slimmer/fatter body*; b) *see yourself as having a slimmer/fatter body*?

This is an interesting experiment because it's quite easy to find yourself 'flicking between' these different perspectives, like flicking between channels. But it's the former perspective that you should aim for, the sense of your body as subject. The latter is the 'problem of the mirror' again, the sense of your body as object.

ORIGINS OF THE EXERCISES

I said earlier that 'Imaginary Bodies' was devised by Michael Chekhov as an aid for actors. In fact, the majority of the exercises in this book are adapted from exercises used in training actors or more generally in drama classes. But here their goal is to develop a richer sense of the *lived body* for anyone at all – anyone at all of whatever age or 'body type'.

I've worked with these kinds of exercises in theatre classes for a very long time. For a very long time I've also had the strong sense that their benefit goes way beyond training actors. But, again for a long time, I did not try to formulate what that wider benefit might be – not until quite recently. Why not? Mainly, I think, because the exercises are such fun. As I've suggested above, the best way to do them is to enjoy doing them without thinking about their purpose. To some extent that applies to showing others how to do them too. When you stop to think about it, however, it's the very fact that they're fun that's the clue to their wider relevance for people in general and not just for actors. If they're fun for trainee actors, they should be fun for others too – and if their being fun is essential to their beneficial effects, these effects ought to be available to anyone able to enjoy doing them. They've become thought of as actors' exercises simply because actors are, for professional training purposes, allowed to *play* much more than the rest of us 'grown ups' are.

Nonetheless, it's worth looking just a little more closely at their benefit for actors. According to Michael Chekhov in his book *To the Actor*, the actor needs to achieve *great sensitivity of the body to psychological realities*. He stresses that this cannot be achieved by physical exercises alone, in the sense of exercises that work on the body as a merely 'mechanical' system, for body and mind (or body and soul) must be experienced and lived as one. Whereas in everyday life it may remain possible to think of the physical and the psychological as being distinct realms, or distinct kinds of reality, the actor has to learn how to absorb psychological qualities into their very flesh, even, I would add, into their bones, so that the body of the actor becomes what Chekhov calls a "sensitive membrane" through which thoughts, emotions, feelings and urges freely pass and can therefore be expressed (Chekhov, 2).

One can readily see how this approach will help the actor, since the actor's job is to communicate to audiences the complex, shifting *internal* life of characters via their *external* being and behaviour. But it ought also to be possible to see, in the light of earlier parts of this Introduction, how it challenges the sense of a split between body and mind that permeates Western culture, and how it can help us overcome the alienation from our bodies that follows from this split. It may even be sensed that here is a way to get wholly back inside our bodies.

As far as possible I've indicated the original source of an exercise (or at least where I first came across it), even where I've

made significant changes to it. Even so, my knowledge of these origins is far from complete. While some exercises are easy to attribute, anyone who has taught in this field will be aware of the complex process of sharing, recycling, adaptation and evolution of exercises that makes the 'parentage' of many others more obscure. I should also acknowledge here that even those exercises which I consider my own inventions have been stimulated or influenced by the work of others; but it would be too cumbersome, and pointless in the present context, to try to record this.

THE SPIRIT OF EXPERIMENT

Naturally I've been very selective in the choice of exercises. My criteria of selection have been that the exercises included here should

1. promote the goal of bringing you more in touch with your body-as-subject,
2. be doable by any reasonably fit individual, and
3. be doable on your own.

The third of these criteria is the most restrictive, since many actors' exercises and games are designed for pairs or for groups. But there are plenty enough left to make a complete *autocours*. Occasionally, however, I've described an exercise or game that needs more than one participant, in the interest of clarifying a crucial principle.

Working on your own necessarily means that you do not have a teacher or guide to observe you and perhaps 'correct' any 'mistakes'. Is this a problem? Not at all – not, that is, if you adopt the right *spirit of experiment*. In fact, I would argue that there is a benefit in working on your own like this (given the same proviso) – after all, it is *your body* that you are exploring, getting fully in tune with and realizing as *you rather than yours*. If you remain focused on and alert to your own psychophysical reality and open to psychophysical changes, then you cannot make 'mistakes'. Nothing you will learn can be called 'technique,' a word which implies some kind of going beyond your natural endowment; on the contrary, you will be reconnecting with your nature.

Still, I cannot stress strongly enough the need for that spirit of experiment. The great and influential acting teacher Jerzy Grotowski, who revolutionized our ideas of performance in the second half of the twentieth century, insists that exercises should never simply be repeated. They can be varied as necessary as a way of avoiding repetition, but most importantly each exercise should always be

approached in a spirit of exploration or research, as if for the first time. There were times, he says, when his group gave up doing exercises entirely, even for as long as eight months, because they realized that the exercises were being done for their own sake, not as a means to further discoveries. When the exercises were resumed, they were experienced in a completely different way (Grotowski, 210).

I am not advocating giving up the exercises for such long periods, of course! I'm saying that you need to find ways to avoid merely repeating the exercises, where 'merely repeating' means letting what is psychophysical become merely physical. In effect, 'merely repeating' implies no longer doing the exercises in the spirit of *play* and the spirit of *experiment* are very closely connected.

One simple way to help keep the exercises fresh and exploratory is to keep varying the ones that you do and the sequence in which you do them. But this applies only after you've worked through the book, which is organized as a progressive course. Above all, the division between Parts One, Two and Three of the book should be respected, since each new Part takes you significantly deeper in 're-imagining your body' (see below). However, once you've worked through these three Parts you will be fully free to do whatever exercises you like in whatever order you like.

THE THREE LEVELS

As just noted, the division of the course into three parts is important. These parts can be thought of as 'levels,' with Part Two taking you deeper than Part One, and Part Three taking you deeper than Part Two. In outline, Part One aims to make you aware of the unity of self and body. Part Two aims to transform your sense of your body's being-in-the-world. Part Three aims to develop your sense of what might be called the spiritual expressiveness of the body.

If your goal is simply to improve your poise, your posture, your presence, the fluidity and power of your movement, and such like – that is, all those qualities that flow from your 'being-at-oneness' with your body – then Part One, 'Being Fully Inside Your Body,' will serve you amply. But if you wish to embark upon a real journey of discovery, one which may take you to places you did not initially envisage, then you need Part Two and especially Part Three as well. Part Two, 'Demoting the Conscious Controller,' tries to shift the idea of the body as something that acts in the world in subjection to our

will (a conception that separates the body too much from the world) towards an idea of the body as receptive, responsive and finely tuned to the world, and able to tap into and draw from its rich resources. Part Three, 'Metamorphoses,' then shows how exploring the 'Unconscious Body' (by analogy with the Unconscious Mind) can take us beyond our everyday and socially-normative behavioural patterns into the deep spiritual waters of what I call the 'body-as-possibility'.

The book also contains two Appendices, for those who wish to follow up the ideas behind the exercises in a more theoretical way. Appendix One provides a brief history of the Western dualistic thinking that lies behind the distorted or lop-sided view of the body that remains so prevalent today. Appendix Two surveys some recent scientific research that may provide an explanation of why and how the exercises in the book work.

For many other supplementary and related materials, visit

<https://www.re-imaginingyourbody.com>

That's it! You're now ready to start out on a journey of discovery of *your-body-as-you* and of *yourself-as-your-body*. Here, then, to close this Introduction, is the simple exercise I promised you a little earlier, which has the purpose of making you more aware of your body-as-a-whole. Its effect is subtle, but striking.

EXERCISE: CHEST EXPANDER... TORSO OPENER... BODY SMILE

*You start 'mechanically' (and, to be honest, boringly) with something all too familiar. Stand with your feet a little more than shoulder width apart. Bring your hands in front of your chest at shoulder height, palms down, finger tips almost touching, with your elbows out to the sides, also at shoulder height. Then swing your arms outwards as far as you can, straightening them at the elbows, **keeping the palms facing downwards**. Immediately swing them back again, bending the elbows, and... just keep repeating this, over and over (but not for too long, just enough to get a feel for it). This, of course, is a simple mindless exercise, focused on a part of the body. For the time being, all you have to do is remain aware of your body. Don't start thinking of something else (easy though this is with such 'mechanical' exercises).*

*And... stop. The next step is to change one detail. From now on, in the way you swing your arms outwards, you must also **turn the palms over** so that they come to face directly upwards at full extension of your arms. As you*

swing your arms in again, **turn the palms back over** so that they're facing directly downwards when they almost meet in front of your chest. Do this a few times and notice the difference. You should feel that now your chest expands, or 'opens,' much more than it did before, and you naturally raise your head a little higher. In a general (whole body) way, you become 'bigger' and more open, in fact. Try to understand why this is, how something as simple as the direction your palms are facing can make such a huge difference to the way you feel.

For the third phase of the exercise you need to use a little imagination. Perform exactly the same repeated movement as you just did (turning the palms over), but this time, on the 'outstroke,' as you feel your chest opening, imagine also that your lower torso, your abdomen, is opening as well. Try to feel this as an 'echo' or 'amplification' of the opening of your chest. You might even feel yourself opening a little at the knees (provided they're not locked, which they shouldn't be) too. Then... smile, just a little, as you continue the exercise, **smile as you open**. You should feel that your smile is a perfectly appropriate, fitting part of the exercise. It's not imposed. A smile is naturally an 'opening' of the face, isn't it? Whereas a frown is a closing of the face. Now imagine the way your whole torso opens on the outstroke as being itself a kind of smile, a smile of the whole body! It's a good feeling.

Once you've appreciated that good feeling, then, just to see that something real is going on here (for we often need to use the imagination to get at the real), go back to the first way of doing 'chest expander,' with no turning over of the palms. Smile as you do this. You'll find that there's no connection at all between the smile and the movement; it's just like you're thinking of something else!