

The Anatomy of the Self

Working with the Mind through the Three Burners

by Bill Palmer

*From the Tao emerges the One
The One creates the Two
The Two implies the Three
And from Three come the Ten Thousand Things.
Lao Zi - The Dao De Jing*

Self and Other

The above verse from the Dao De Jing has many interpretations, one of which is that it describes the development of self-awareness. The primal sense of self (The One) emerges in childhood from undifferentiated sensations and feelings but its boundaries are only really formed in relation to Other People (The Two). The Self develops as a Mediator (The Three) between inner urges and outer pressures and it is this dialogue that creates self-awareness and our internal model of other people: a cascade of reflections like a hall of mirrors: What am I? What does she think of me? What do I feel about what she thinks of me? And so on ... (the 10,000 things)

This view of the structure of the self resonates with modern psychology all the way back to Freud. However, Freud's attitude to the unconscious primal self was coloured by cultural prejudices that are still prevalent. He saw the unconscious as infantile, made up of uncontrolled urges associated with the body like sex and aggression. This standpoint, rooted in Judeo-Christian culture, leads to the body and bodily urges being seen as dangerous, inherently destructive and needing to be controlled by the mind. From this doctrine came the idea of original sin, the fear of sexuality, the subjugation of women, racism and the higher status of mental work relative to physical work. It may also be the reason that psychotherapy is more widely respected than body therapies like Shiatsu as evidenced by the money people are willing to pay for each.

This article explores a more positive view of the body and the unconscious in relationship to the mind. It also explains how the traditional Chinese model of the Three Burners can be interpreted to give a way of working with the body that helps to activate and integrate these aspects of the Self.

The Human Dilemma

We are both individualists and tribal creatures. That is a real dilemma, which has been the basis of what Joseph Campbell calls the 'Desert religions'. These are Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Campbell points out that, in the stark environment of the desert, individualism was dangerous. In Campbell's view, gods are a projection of the tribal culture, so a desert god made strong rules, like the Ten Commandments, that controlled individual behaviour.

In many religions, like the religion of ancient Greece and Hinduism the gods do not particularly control individual behaviour, but are representations of archetypal human capacities like creativity, bravery, love and justice or expressions of elemental phenomena like time, earth, location or light.

In the desert religions, our instinctive urges are seen as dangerous because they had the capacity to break the fragile integrity of the tribe in a hostile environment. Powerful urges such as sex, ownership, aggression and even creativity needed to be tamed to benefit the tribe rather than the individual.

These urges emerge from our emotions and our bodies and are not usually under conscious control. So in cultures based on the desert religions, like ours, the unconscious and the body is seen as intrinsically dangerous and even evil.

These unconscious impulses are what Freud called the ID. And those pressures from society, which we have internalised and been conditioned by, he called the SUPEREGO. In his model the EGO is the aspect of the self that tries to balance these two forces. Since Freud was a product of the desert religious culture, he couldn't help giving the impression that the ID was a dangerous, blind and even evil force.

The Body is Bad

In the modern age, this view is becoming even more prevalent. As Jared Diamond points out, while tribal cultures often see the primal urges of the body such as sex and aggression as intelligent spirits that need to be harnessed,

larger cultures tend to view them as blind forces that need to be controlled by conditioning. A large proportion of modern child rearing is spent conditioning people to be ashamed of their natural being and to distrust the unconscious intelligence of their bodies.

Taoism and Shinto, which have both influenced the foundations of oriental medicine, basically hold the opposite view. They both see the conscious self as riding on but not controlling the more powerful and more intelligent spirits of the unconscious body. If we really follow that philosophy, then it transforms the practice of Shiatsu.

In the practice of Shiatsu, because the client is usually quite passive and the practitioner is quite knowledgeable there is a tendency for both parties to have the impression that it is the practitioner who is choreographing the Qi through their expertise. But I believe that the feeling of Qi is actually the sensation of contacting the primal intelligence of the receiver's body. I think we are picking up micro-movements of the tissues responding to our touch and our brains interpret this subconscious physical sensation as a feeling of energy in the same way we feel the rapport with a dance partner because of the harmony of the movements. I believe that this unconscious intelligence is actually cleverer than my conscious mind and the best I can do is make contact with it, facilitate its actions and not try to control it.

Amplifying Touch

One of the fundamental techniques of Movement Shiatsu is to sense these subtle movements of the tissues and to amplify them so that they become conscious. This technique is called Amplifying Touch. As I have explained in other articles, I see each individual as a community - every tissue, every organ and every muscle as a person. This community of inner-people needs to work together for us to be whole.

From this viewpoint, the body is a group of autonomous but collaborating agents rather than an organic machine being controlled by a centralised mind. The body-community idea is in agreement with recent research into human biology and neurology. For instance, the enteric system is now known to be an autonomous brain in the gut causing moods and sensations that spur us to satisfy a need. In fact this 'second brain' is much better at detecting what we need than our head brain but, because its intelligence is non-verbal, we often override its advice because our culture gives more status to verbal understanding as opposed to sensual information. By amplifying the subtle movements of these body intelligences, the information they give can be more easily perceived. Shiatsu becomes group therapy for the body and Amplifying Touch is equivalent to the process of making sure that every member of the group is heard.

Because the movement of the inner organs is hard to sense, the deeply unconscious aspects of the self tend to be buried in them and working with the movements of the organs can expose potentials which are missing at a deep, constitutional level or which have been long hidden in reaction to trauma.

The Three Selves

Since the words Id, Superego and Ego have become tainted with the desert religions' distrust of the unconscious I would like to re-brand these three parts of the self as:

1) The Primal Self is the source of our primary impulses - for instance, hunger, sex, creativity and aggression. These drives come from the self and are not really concerned with other people or the environment. They are not bad in themselves; in fact, they are necessary for human life. They often contain real wisdom about what we need to do to realise our potential and live a full life. The Primal Self is embodied in movement that is self-directed, forward pushing, one pointed, target focused and aggressive in the sense that it doesn't take other people into account.

2) The Social Self develops from society's conditioning and is also expressed in some of our instinctive archetypes such as the Mother, the Caregiver, the Lover and the Everyman. In its positive role it is open and listening to the needs and desires of others. Physically, the Social Self opens the body to contact with the outer world, expands the posture and opens the heart.

3) The Authentic Self takes in the expectations and the demands of the outer world and digests them, assimilating those that are compatible with our personality and character and rejecting those that would inhibit something essential to our sense of self. Physically this dimension of the Self is embodied in movements that emphasize the centre and circulation around a core. These movements tend to bring our attention inward to digest the input from the outer world. The Authentic Self acts as an arbitrator between the upper body (relating to others) and the lower body (primal drives and impulse for movement).

Many of our problems come from an imbalance between these dimensions of the self. Too much Social Self creates a self-critical, self-controlled, inhibited personality that is too concerned with what should be and what other people might think. This becomes embodied in tight muscular control, contracted postures and inhibition

of spontaneous expression. Too much Primal Self creates an impulsive, selfish, abusive and invasive personality that becomes embodied in lack of containment, lack of ground and over-expanded postures. We could view the process of maturing as the development of the Authentic Self that balances these two forces.

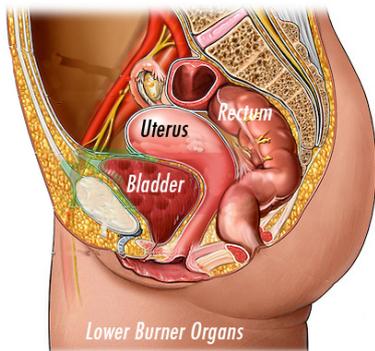
The Three Burners

Each of these dimensions is naturally related to various aspects of the body. This is practically useful because one can develop aspects of the psyche that are unexpressed by listening to and activating the related organs.

For instance, the Primal Self by itself is quite autistic and selfish. It takes no account of others but is highly motivated and focused. It needs input from the Social Self, so if the latter is under-developed then working with the organs associated with the Social Self is a way of opening up to the messages from the outer world.

The Three Burners of traditional Oriental Medicine naturally relate the body to the three selves:

1. The Lower Burner is an embodiment of the Primal Self



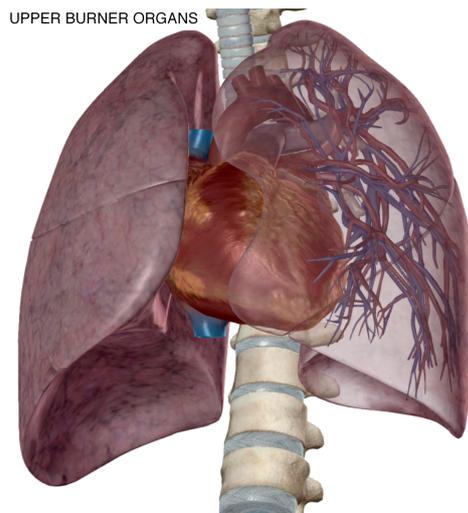
The organs of the lower burner are the PUSHING ORGANS. The rectum, the bladder, the large intestine and the uterus all push down and out. Excretion is the first act of pushing that babies perform and it underlies the development of pushing with the skeletal muscles - especially with the muscles of the legs - which drive us forward and impel us into movement.

The kidneys are also traditionally included in the Lower Burner. In Chinese medicine the Kidneys are the home of our Zhi - which is the source of our primal impulses, our sex drive, our will and our creativity. This identification may be related to the fact that the adrenal glands sit on top of the kidney and activate the Sympathetic Nervous system, preparing us for action and movement.

Finally, all the organs of the lower burner support the sacrum and lumbar spine and help transmit force from the legs into the vertebral column so that the impulse from the legs flows through the whole body.

So working with all these organs and activating the muscles of the legs is a good way of developing impulsive, spontaneous and goal-directed movements and thus getting in touch with the Primal Self.

2. The Upper Burner is an embodiment of the Social Self



The organs of the Upper Burner are the Lungs, Pericardium and Heart. The lungs expand and open the chest. The heart pumps fluid into the limbs and thus continues the energy of expansion and opening.

The chest is also the place where we feel emotions of love, loss and benevolence connecting us to others and expanding into the world.

These organs are particularly related to the arms and the head. When the lungs expand and the blood is circulating well the shoulders open and the arms spread. If the breathing is shallow and the heart is not strong, the posture collapses and the head falls forward, cutting us off from the world.

The Upper Burner is the part of the body that expresses our inner feelings to the outside world but is also the place where these feelings and impulses can be inhibited and repressed.

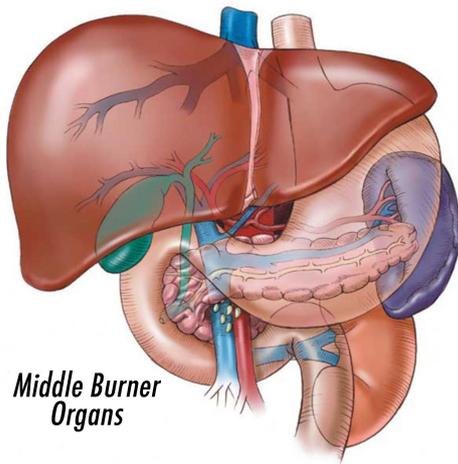
So working with these organs, as well as relaxing the inhibitory muscles of the neck and shoulder is a good way of supporting open posture and expansive movements and thus getting in touch with the Social Self.

3. The Middle Burner is an embodiment of the Authentic Self

The organs of the Middle Burner are the Liver, Stomach, Gall Bladder, Small Intestine and Pancreas. They are the digestive organs, receiving energy from the outer world and transforming it into a form that can be assimilated.

Digestion also needs to happen emotionally. The expectations, rules, demands and needs of other people are an emotional energy input and we need to digest it. Some of their expectations may fit with our soul and so can be assimilated without compromising our core self. Other demands may be so foreign to us that we should have the option of saying no. If those alien expectations drive us for too long, we tend to cut off from our core self and repress our own energy.

So the Middle Burner digestion process is an arbiter between the expectations of the outer world and our core soul. Without it, we may be swept along by the expectations of others and lose track of our Authentic Self.



Activating the stomach helps us to really take in the input from the outer world. The small intestine discriminates between that which can be assimilated and that which is damaging to our spirit. The liver, gall bladder and pancreas transform the outer input into energy that we can use. All of the middle burner organs, especially the liver, support the upper body from underneath so are the physical foundation of a relaxed and open posture, helping us to relax into ourselves, to feel self-supported and self-confident.

Thus working with these organs is a good way of developing a sense of the Authentic Self and a healthy Ego that can be open to the outer world but can also listen and stick up for the needs and impulses of the Primal Self.

The Triple Heater

This 'organ without form' was shrouded in mystery in traditional Chinese thought but they saw it as the means of communication between the three burners and, in fact, every part of the inner community. As Carola Beresford-Cooke explains, the Triple Heater and the Pericardium are associated with what the Chinese call the Bao that is a general term for all forms of connective tissue, including the fascia.



The character for Bao also has the connotation of a womb (the red part of the character is an embryo) and each organ, each muscle, each bone has its own womb-fascia, protecting and containing it.

Contacting the fascia is an essential part of working with the organs because the sensory nerves that perceive their movement are the stretch receptors in the organ fascia, the mesentery and the ligaments connecting it to the spine. But more than that, it is fascia that connects everything together and forms the social network in the inner community. For instance, muscles don't attach to bone, it is bone fascia (periosteum) that connects to muscle fascia through more fascia concentrated into a tendon. Whereas our five senses face outwards to perceive the outer world, fascia is a sense organ that faces inward to perceive our inner community, softly containing it and helping it to coordinate as a holistic society. Therefore, working with the physical organs and the fascia together form a powerful tool for dealing with the relationship between self and society.

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