



The Astral Body

breathing archetype and awareness *into* the body's physiology

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We are sensing beings. So much so that we usually take it as a matter of course that we have perceptive capacity for both our body and the world around us. Sensing is in reality a finely nuanced and modulated process, but one which we may not notice until some part of its activity gets out of balance. For example, it is really good to be aware of *some* parts of our body. In fact, if you woke one morning and you were not immediately aware of your surroundings through vision, hearing, smell and taste, you would be alarmed that something was wrong, and something probably would be

wrong. On the other hand, there are organs and activities of the body that should remain unconscious in their function, in which case sudden awareness—usually pain—comes as a sign that something is out of order. If you are asked "how is your colon or your gallbladder doing today?"—you really shouldn't be able to give many specifics, except to hopefully say that things are fine.

Within our sensing activity there is actually an archetypal spectrum, a gradient of bodily awareness from our head down: most of the senses of our head cannot be turned off

Astral Body [continued from page 37]

(we can close our eyes, but not our ears or nose) and are “on” all of the time. It is appropriate that they should stay on. Moving down the body, we then come to our awareness of the breath—unconscious most of the time—but which we can easily consciously direct, both the rhythm and the depth of respiration, with a simple shift in consciousness. A step more hidden is the heart rate and circulation. We may become aware of it through exercise or anxiety, through meditative practice or biofeedback, and learn to influence our heart rate, but our daily consciousness is asleep to it most of the time.

to. It can shift, as quickly as our moods.

In anthroposophic medicine, this sensing or “sentient” activity, carried by a spiritual aspect of the human being, is called the *astral body*. While Rudolf Steiner does name it as a “body,” it is not like the physical body which we can touch and see in space, nor like the etheric body which manifests through processes of growth and metamorphosis in time. The astral body does not manifest so much in space or in time, but in quality. The quality of our awareness is a reflection of the activity of our astral body, as it moves and weaves through the

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Below the diaphragm we come to an even more fully hidden realm—with urges for hunger, for thirst, the need to urinate or defecate—but they are often “gut feelings” as opposed to clear sense impressions, more instincts than intellectual processes. How we experience our body shifts from the cranial nerves, to the sympathetic, to the parasympathetic nervous system, the deeper we look into the body.

Our consciousness can shift its level of awareness outside of the body as well. It regularly alternates between fully engaging with the surrounding world, and withdrawing from its sensations. This happens most clearly in the rhythm of waking and sleeping. But even during waking consciousness, when many of our senses are fully “on,” our engagement through them to the world outside can range from self-absorbed oblivion to frenetic hyper-attentiveness. There is a mobility inherent in our sensing capacities. How we sense the world is of course also influenced by how tired we are, how interested we are, how many different things we are trying to pay attention

lower members of the physical body and the etheric body. We can most clearly see its character by looking to the difference between a waking and sleeping human being. In the waking person, physical body, etheric body, astral body are all working together. In the sleeping person the physical and etheric bodies remain, while the astral body releases from them. Dreaming sleep can be seen as a transitional stage, when the astral body is entering back into the physical and etheric, bringing dreaming consciousness, movement, animation and perhaps some bodily sensation, but has not yet entered in deeply enough to begin to accurately sense the surrounding environment.¹

The *flexibility* of our sensing activity could be characterized as one archetypal quality of the astral body. The way we sense our environment varies, so that our consciousness is in effect mobile. The astral body brings not only sensing “mobility,” it also brings physical mobility. *Mobility* is perhaps a better descriptor for the astral body than *flexibility*, because when a living being has an astral body, it can also move through its

environment and choose how it wants to interact with the environment.

This becomes more apparent when we look at the differences between three kingdoms of the natural world, the realms of the mineral, plant, and animal. These three kingdoms are distinct specifically because of their differentiated physical and spiritual physiology.

A mineral has physical characteristics—density, color, shape—which will not dynamically change within the mineral's own inherent being. In a mineral we encounter physical body only. And its physical body exhibits no real orientation in relation to its environment (where are the feet of the stone, what is its left side?).

A plant, in contrast, does change in time, it grows, it reproduces. It has an up and down orientation (still not left or right, front or back), but reaching up to the sun, down into the earth, with an open and continuous relationship with its environment. A plant accepts and adjusts itself to the changing seasons and conditions of the environment. It has a fixed place in its environment. The plant has several additional qualities above and beyond what can be observed in the stone—growth, reproduction, an up and down orientation—and this is because the physical body of the plant has been penetrated with etheric forces. Etheric forces bring dynamic change in time, and orientation to the earth and the sun.

When we get to the animal realm, there is now again something added. An animal senses its environment, with specialized sense organs. An animal judges its environment. Likewise, its interaction with the environment is differentiated; it wakes and sleeps. An animal moves freely through its environment, can choose its home environment, and even modify its environment (through nest or burrow building). Its physical form is also more complex, with an orientation that is no longer just up and down, but suddenly up-down, front-back, left-right. And additionally, an animal exhibits emotion, urges, and instinctual knowledge. These qualities, too, belong to the astral body and its activities. A living creature is part of the animal kingdom because it has a physical body, filled with etheric forces, which are then breathed through by the differentiated qualities of the astral body. An animal is different from a plant because it has these astral forces within it.

Emotions, urges and instincts are not limited to the animal realm. The range of feeling that we experience daily is a huge part of our life as human beings. Our ups and downs, likes and dislikes, are all made possible through the astral activity within ourselves.²

If we look carefully we can see that sensing and emotion are connected; in a way, two sides of the same coin. Our perceptions and reactions—bored, vigilant, animated, distracted—are all reflections of how our perceptual life is connecting with the world around us. When we are bored, we are having difficulty finding something in the environment we can connect to in a meaningful way. When we are vigilant, we are purposefully (perhaps through fear, perhaps through engagement) reluctant to release our sensing connection with the environment. When we are animated, we are expanding and sharing our inner life so that it is easily visible to the world around us. When distracted, we may be so held by the experience of our inner life that we do not connect with the outside world, or so open to each new impression that we cannot commit to any of them. Our range of emotion is an astral manifestation, and influences our sensing capacity.

What is amazing about these ranging expressions of our astral body, of our sensing and soul life, is that each of us can experience the full range. We are not locked into one sensing activity, or one emotion. We are changeable, without being completely changed. A third archetypal characteristic of the astral body is that it brings *quality* to an activity. How awake we are, how expressive we are, how attentive we are—all are reflections of the intensity of the astral body activity. Ranging intensity characterizes the astral body. Therefore, whenever we see ranging sensory or emotional activities, we can feel confident that the astral body is at work.

To summarize, we can name archetypal qualities of the astral body as: mobility and ranging quality or intensity.

Because the etheric body is also characterized by change and growth in time, this could seem confusing. But the kind of change brought by the etheric body versus the astral body is quite different. The etheric body brings organic changes of size, shape and structure, which generally remain below the threshold of consciousness. Think of the growth of a plant, changing in time, e.g. from a seed to a sprout to a plant, to a fruit, or the healing of a wound. This metamorphosis happens slowly enough that you cannot see it happening in real time. In contrast, the activities and intensities of the astral body do change quickly, from moment to moment. A plant cannot go from a seed to a fruit, back to a sprout. We know instinctively that such a sequence is abstract and on some level ridiculous, as no single plant could carry out that kind of change. But when we watch an animal or a human being that has an astral body—a sniffing dog, a feeding hummingbird, an exploring toddler—the qualities brought by the astral body change

Astral Body [continued from page 39]

moment to moment. We all know that emotions frequently range from happy, to hunger, to sad, to jealous, to happy again, perhaps all in a few minutes.

This ranging activity brings extremes too, and now we enter the realm of pathology, because the astral body also brings the possibility for illness.

For what happens when we get stuck in too much awareness? What happens when the astral forces, which should act flexibly and variably through the body, becomes too connected to the body? The answer is pain. Too intense an awareness brings pain. Think of our skin. It is a tremendous gift that we can choose to be so aware of our skin when we want to—like molding clay with our hands, or a gentle kiss—and yet also able to completely let go of that awareness. If you tie your shoes in the morning you are undoubtedly aware of the pressure placed around your foot by the shoe and laces, but then you can generally go through the rest of the day without thinking about it. But if that awareness gets stuck, so that perception is stuck in the “on” position, this will lead to pain. If the skin is abraded, with the natural sheathing of the physical and etheric body disrupted, then the astral body loses the flexibility to choose whether to engage with the world and instead feels it all the time. Too much sensitivity is a form of illness.

A more physically perceptual activity of the astral body is form. When we concentrate our attention, we bring form to our consciousness. Even the fact that we use the word “concentrate” to describe the process tells us that there is a pulling in and condensing activity involved. In the same way (but now on a physiologic instead of a consciousness level), the astral body also brings form and structure to the physical and etheric bodies. This allows us to have differentiated organ systems. And that forming impulse, which in its healthy state should have breathing flexibility, can also get stuck, and then we experience a cramp. Skeletal muscle, by its very nature, needs to weave back and forth between tension and relaxation, between the contraction (the “forming”) first of flexor muscles, then extensor muscles. But if the astral body gets too engaged and can't let go, then the muscle will cramp. And this picture easily leads us back to the other qualities of the astral body, because too much astral activity on the level of consciousness can bring concomitant excessive physically manifest astral activity. Muscles stiffen and become hard and painful with too much awareness, too much stress. Think of tension headaches, bruxism (teeth grinding), and muscular trigger points.

The activity of the astral body can manifest on several levels: a muscle cramp in the leg; the irritability and increased

body awareness that often accompany menstrual cramps; shortness of breath in an anxiety attack; trigger points in fibromyalgia; or phobias and rituals in an obsessive-compulsive disorder. In each there is an exaggerated, astral activity, with either excessive form or excessive awareness.

In the other extreme, when the astral body is not engaged because it cannot enter properly into or through the body, we may see a loss of form or awareness. Waking consciousness may be slowed or disrupted. Muscle tone decreased or absent. Instead of agitation, lethargy. Instead of animation, anhedonia. Purely vegetative activities (of the physical and etheric bodies) remain intact, but the active sensing and modulation of our soul life is absent. These “underactive” astral illnesses certainly do occur, but in today's often frenetic and sensory-saturated lifestyle, the excessive imbalances of the astral body regularly predominate.

In the middle realm, between cramp and flaccidity, is where the astral body's richness shines. The astral body's activities do bring risk of imbalance, but without the astral body we would lose much, as everything of an artistic nature—color, tone, shape, mood, intensity—arises out of the astral realm. And the worlds of emotion and experience they help to convey—grief, love, rage, tranquility—also come from the astral body. Artistic experience is both an expression out of, and a pathway into, the astral realm. For this reason anthroposophic medicine has developed many artistic therapies, including painting and drawing, music, and eurythmy, which can all be experienced as potent pathways for bringing flexibility and balance back to the astral functioning.

One of our greatest challenges, as human beings, is to continually find ways to be artistic, aware, and expressive, without being ruled by these astral processes. This requires not only consciousness, but self-consciousness, learning to know and respect our astral activities but also learning when and how to make use of them. An animal lives out its life purely in this astral realm, without the capacity for moderation or reflection. The human capacity to fully experience the astral realm, but also seek to rule and refine it, whether on a sensory, physiologic, or emotional level, is one of the great tasks we face in medicine. Because we can feel, we also know pain; because there is flexibility, imbalance. Such are the joys and challenges of the astral body. 

- 1 The spiritual physiology of sleeping, dreaming, and waking consciousness is a common theme in Rudolf Steiner's written works and lecture cycles. For a careful description of these terms see his book, *Theosophy*. (Anthroposophic Press, 1994).
- 2 A fourth spiritual member, the I-being, creates the capacity for self-consciousness and moral consideration, uniquely human qualities.