

Frogs, Neuron Pathways and EnneaMotion

By Andrea Isaacs

I'll never forget it. Even though I was "just" a dance major, I had to take pre-med physiology and anatomy. Because my university had a good medical school, we were "fortunate" enough to have cadavers to work with in our anatomy class. The physiology class, also pre-med, had its share of rats, gerbils and frogs, which we used in quite a few experiments.

Leaving out the gruesome details, one of the most memorable labs was exploring "neuron pathways." Neuron pathways are the channels through which information travels between the brain and body. A neuron pathway begins with a message, thought or impulse from the brain. This message travels along the nerves. The nerves communicate the message to appropriate muscle groups which then engage the body in the desired action. Messages can flow in the opposite direction along these neuron pathways also. A physical sensation, like touching a hot stove for instance, could begin a series of messages. The muscles would innervate the nerves, and the nerves would give a message to the brain, in this case, "Pain." An immediate message from the brain would flow back to the hand to remove the hand from the stove. This series of messages is communicated so quickly, fluidly and unconsciously that you're not aware of it happening.

The earliest neuron pathways we develop probably originate in the body. As we mature and our thinking ability develops, we exercise various pathways and begin to develop message patterns that originate in the brain. These are not as automatic and need to be learned, practiced and repeated before becoming smooth and efficient.

As infants, we were unable to reach for a cup gracefully. We first practiced with a bottle, holding it sometimes with both arms and feet, and it was years until we finally learned to use it properly. By the time we grow up, it has become an automatic response—we feel thirst and quite adeptly reach for a cup, bring it to our mouths, swallow, spill nothing, and replace the cup. We have forgotten how long and comic our learning period was. We perform thousands of other examples spontaneously and immediately throughout the day, each time activating countless nerve and muscle synapses to execute messages from our brains.

Back to the lab. Working with frogs, we would pinch their feet under different circumstances to explore if, when and how the frogs would react. We found that reactions went in both directions along these neuron pathways. If we pinched their feet, they'd withdraw them; when we activated pain centers in the brain, their bodies would flinch in a certain way. Though these lab experiments were difficult emotionally, and certainly animal rights groups would have a lot to say about them, the point was explicitly made.

There are neuron pathways throughout the body, messages can and do flow along them, and the messages flow in both directions.

Later in life, it dawned on me that we spend years perfecting how to send messages from the mind, training our bodies to "behave," but spend much less time developing our "listening ability" for messages that originate in the body. In time, the intelligence of the body can become atrophied through disuse.

One of the ideas behind EnneaMotion is that our mental states influence our physical actions as much as physical actions influence our minds and moods. For example, is there such a thing as a physical realm of confidence? Imagine moving directly in space, with a particular kind of force, decisive and not hesitating. After moving like this for a while, we would generate, activate and develop the neuron pathway that transmits the feeling of confidence, and we would start to feel confident. The exercise would be concluded with a stance that captures this feeling of confidence, represented by having the feet firmly planted on the ground, activating the abdominal muscles to feel strength in the gut, with the arms deliberately connected into the back, and feeling the whole body as one dynamic unit. If we practice and hold the "confidence pose," our neuron pathways get trained and we could assume this physical stance of confidence in a moment of need. The message provoked by this stance would run along the neuron pathway that had already been created, and a feeling of confidence would arise. This confidence would be there not only physically, but emotionally and intellectually as well.

The more experience we have developing and listening to the flow of intelligence from our bodies, the more balanced we can be and the easier it can become to respond to life's situations with appropriate action.

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