DIGESTION

The digestive system is involved with taking in, integration, and letting go. It is one continuous tract from the mouth to the anus, bringing elements of the outer environment through the inner environment for digestion and absorption. The tissue itself is partially composed of contractile fibers to aid in the digestive process and to move the food through the tract. A series of sphincters permit passage and prohibit reversal of ingested food. Like breathing, digestion is an exchange with the environment; our inner-outer dialogue affects efficient functioning.

The digestive tract begins with the mouth: lips, tongue, and teeth. The throat is the first sphincter, simultaneously opening to the esophagus and closing the adjacent passageway to the oral cavity and the larynx/trachea. The esophagus is in front of the bodies of the seven cervical vertebrae and behind the trachea, forming the central core of the neck. (Swallow to feel this pathway.) The esophagus and trachea provide vertical support for the neck at the organ level. The esophagus passes between the lungs and behind the heart. “Heart burn” is a common term for indigestion occurring in the esophagus. It then passes through a hole in the breathing diaphragm to connect to the stomach. The diaphragm divides the torso into two cavities, upper and lower, and forms the floor for the heart and lungs and the ceiling for the stomach and liver. The stomach has considerable mobility, suspended by the lesser omentum, and is capable of extending as far down as the bladder after a full meal. The primary function of the stomach is to break down food for absorption. The pyloric sphincter oversees passage of churned food from the stomach to the small intestine. Ninety percent of the nutrients pass into the blood stream over a period of three to five hours while the food – now called chyme – is in the small intestine. The remaining ten percent of the absorption process occurs in the stomach and large intestine. Small capillaries remove nutrients to the liver through the hypatic portal system. The small intestine, commonly known as our “guts,” is approximately one inch in diameter and twenty-one feet in length, and consists of the duodenum, the jejunum, and the ileum. It intertwines in the cavity made by the frame of the large intestine, supported by the horizontal bowl of the pelvis and the front of the lumbar spine; fascia (common mesentery) contributes to their tight packing, and the abdominal sheath gives muscular support on the front surface and wraps around to the vertebrae in back. Vessels and nerves arise on the posterior abdominal wall and pass through the tissue to serve the organs. The large intestine continues from the small intestine:

Gut Response

I was at a faculty meeting where we were discussing curriculum. Much reference was being made to the elimination of “gut courses.” Dance and the arts in general are often included in this category. I spoke: “Since the gut is the place in the body responsible for digestion and integration, perhaps we should consider the essential value of these courses in a healthy curriculum. They require us to embody learning.”
Passageway

Students in my anatomy classes wrote of their problems with anorexia or bulimia. One, who was recovering from anorexia, worked on her own to understand the digestive tract. First she visualized the continuous tube from mouth through anus; then she imaged relaxing the sphincters one by one. After a few weeks she could imagine the process of allowing outer material to pass through her body without experiencing fear of being hurt or need to grip for control. She said, “It helps to have some idea of where the choices are located. I have worked with this problem for two years and never had any idea of the shape of the digestive system. The inside of my body just felt dark and tight. Now I can imagine the passageway.”

As we learn to trace the digestive tract, we can relax or strengthen the sphincters and tissue through visualization techniques and exercises. Hands-on massage can also be used in many areas, particularly the small and large intestines. Bulimia, anorexia, ulcers, indigestion and hemorrhoids are a few of the illnesses concerned with the functioning of the digestive tract. The digestive system is one area where emotional problems manifest on a physical level and can be recognized.
Tracing the digestive tract
15 minutes

Lying in constructive rest, with your hands on your belly:
☐ Bring your awareness to your mouth. Feel the jaw relax and the mouth fall slightly open. Swallow. Feel the passage of saliva down the esophagus, in front of the seven cervical vertebrae (behind the trachea). Image the descent through the diaphragm and into the stomach.
☐ Keeping your eyes closed, place your hands on the area below the ribs on your left side. This is your stomach. Gently massage this area to feel its density.
☐ Walk your hands across to the area below the right ribs. This is your liver; it fills the entire width and depth of your ribs on the right side.
☐ Bring your hands to the area below the sternum and xiphoid process often called the solar plexus. This is the area where your pancreas lies on a diagonal from the front to the back of your body. Breathe deeply. Feel the movement of the diaphragm as it presses down into the organs, massaging them with each breath.
☐ Return your hands to the stomach, on the left side of the body, below the ribs. Feel for a dense area near the angle of the ribs where the stomach meets the small intestine; this is the pyloric sphincter.
☐ Move your hands around the abdomen, feeling the interweaving of the small intestines. Your stomach may “gurgle” as you stimulate the digestive tract.
☐ Circle your hands clockwise around the perimeter of the pelvis; image the large intestine as it curves back towards the sacrum to become the rectum and anus.
☐ Contract and relax the anal sphincters, just as you contracted and relaxed the throat to swallow. Image the continuity of the digestive tract as one long tube from mouth to anus.
☐ Note if there are any areas particularly hard to visualize or feel in your digestive tract. Use your breathing from inside the body, and gentle massage from outside the body to help bring these areas into awareness.
Painting: Robert Ferris
"Two Swimmers"