

Philosophy and Spirituality in Body Modification

By: Ian E. Muller



Philosophy and Spirituality in Body Modification by [Ian E. Muller](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#).

I. Introduction

What is Body Modification? Put simply, Body Modification is the altering (usually permanently) of the physical body through means of injecting ink under the skin, piercing with needles and inserting jewelry into the hole made, or by augmenting the body in some way as to change its appearance. Body modification has been in practice throughout history. In fact one of the oldest found human remains featured tattoos. More importantly though, body modification – specifically tattooing – has been a form of spiritual expression for just as long. Why did mankind choose to alter his body (in generally considered painful ways) in order to express spirituality? Why do people continue to do so, for many of the same reasons? And how will this practice evolve overtime, especially considering the evolution of technology? One possibility is that the body is a medium for artistic expression, like clay or canvas. This is the favored explanation by many in the body modification field itself, although a few would disagree.

From my point of view the entire point of body modification is that it's a form of *personal* expression. When I get a tattoo, I'm doing it to myself. I'm not manipulating a pile of clay, or paint on a canvas, I'm manipulating my own body, to make it more pleasing to myself. However, there seems to be more to this than a superficial level of outward expression. Are there philosophical or spiritual reasons behind body modification? If so, how have these reasons evolved, if at all, over the centuries? And will they evolve in the future, as new technology and ideas are introduced?

II. Historical Overview of Body Modification

History

As far back as 3300 B.C.E. (documented, it is assumed the practice is even older) mankind has been in the practice of altering his/her bodies. This has been an important part in many cultures, and has been around in one way or another constantly in every culture throughout history. The most prominent style of body modification is tattooing, but it is by far the “least interesting.” When I began to explore the styles and degrees of body modification, I was immediately immersed in a massive subculture. If you can think of it, someone has done it to his/her body. Ranging from piercing and tattooing, to implanting objects under the skin, to voluntarily removing body parts, body modification has a strong culture surrounding it, which spans all races and nationalities. Yet it doesn't simply ignore racial “differences,” it includes them and almost negates them. In the United States you can see a middle class white man walking around with a two inch plate in his lip like an African or Amazonian tribesman, or a woman in Western Europe with full facial tattoos like the Maori.

And body modification has never left a culture. Even when it became taboo in western culture, it was still apparent in religion, particularly amongst males. Even if it was looked down upon to have markings on the skin or even pierced ears, males were circumcised at birth. Particularly when Christianity was spreading throughout Europe body modification was particularly taboo (with passages in the Torah and Bible condemning it¹) circumcision was popular amongst these religions. In other

1 Leviticus 19:28 - “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on account of the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD.”

cultures, such as China, body modification in general wasn't taboo, but it took on other forms as well as the “normal” ones, such as foot binding.

Medical Body Modifications

Medically there are many reasons for body modification. The most common is plastic surgery, although this can be both medical and cosmetic. For example someone may get a skin graft because of terrible scarring, or a deaf person may get a cochlear implant. Both of these can be considered body modification, but for medical reasons. On the other hand, there's cosmetic body modification, which deals with liposuction, breast implants, face lifts and the like. I will not be dealing with either of these, because these are medical in nature (even the cosmetic surgery) and I feel this isn't the same as traditional body modification like tattooing or even the more extreme things.

III. Spirituality in Body Modification

Throughout history, almost every culture has used some form of body modification to express religious and spiritual beliefs. In Japan for example, the tradition of tattooing is specifically called Irezumi, and became most notable amongst Yakuza, the Japanese organized crime syndicate. However, Irezumi has roots in ancient Japanese culture. This must be considered separately from the Ainu² tattooing, as they are completely unrelated. Irezumi mostly commonly takes the form of full body tattooing of animals, plants, and script. The tattoos are almost entirely spiritual in nature, and relate to characteristics which the person wishes to possess or personify. Historically, Native Americans and related cultures are more commonly known for using body modification, either through tattooing, piercing, or scarification, to portray spiritual exploration and evolution.

One thing I noticed, specifically about Shannon Larratt of BMEzine is that he does not wear jewelry in his ear piercings, which makes them just large dangling holes in his earlobes. In Buddhist statues, specifically those from India, many statues of Buddha and Bodhisattva's show long, dangling earlobes with no jewelry in them as well, as a sign that these individuals have given up worldly possessions (as back then earrings were made of pure metals and very heavy, so the holes they left were large). His response was interesting, but not what I was expecting – it touches on philosophical reasons for it, but not spiritual. “Well, I took my lobe jewelry out because I was snowmobiling a lot and they were getting too cold, and just never got around to putting the jewelry back in. That said, I see “dangling lobes” as a sign of maturity -- I like the idea that stretched lobes go through a series of phases: stretching, living with jewelry, and then living without jewelry. If the individual has lived long enough in the first two phases, they can enjoy the third phase. If they have not, their lobes will still have a youthful elasticity and will shrink closed again.”³

One type of body modification which has been related to a spiritual experience specifically is suspension. Suspension is where a persons body is pierced with hooks, which are then attached to rope or something else, which allows the person to hang in the air. His/Her body is suspended by the hooks in his/her flesh. Many people who do suspensions relate a feeling of calmness and bliss while suspended, and say it can be a very meditative and spiritual experience.

Today, body modification is considered a far more extreme way of expressing spirituality, but it isn't any less common. In fact it has become very popular among younger generations as a way of portraying spiritual beliefs. It is common to see a tattoo of a cross or crucifix, or even of Jesus on a Christian, something which would have never happened even 50 years ago. One particularly popular

2 The Ainu are a indigenous tribe of Japanese people who are culturally different from the Japanese people. Throughout history they lived in Northern Japan, mostly on the island of Hokkaido. They are actually more closely related with the Native American tribes than the Japanese.

3 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

modification is the tattooing of Japanese or Chinese characters to represent personal philosophies. Ironically, the majority of these tattoos are done incorrectly, and instead of reading “power” or “love” the tattoo actually reads “General Tso's Chicken” or “Gullible White Boy.”⁴

Spirituality in Extreme Body Modification

A trend that is becoming, if not more popular then more controversial, is extreme body modification. Now, when I say extreme I don't mean in a bad Mountain Dew commercial way. I mean something a “proper woman” would have fainted at the sight of back in the 50's. Do-It-Yourself (DIY) body mods such as genital mutilation and voluntary amputation, as well as skin removal, implants, and branding are becoming more and more common forms of expression. The most common reason given for body modification is aesthetic – the body is just another medium for art, like canvas. With this in mind, why is the removal of a finger or hand, or splitting your tongue in twain any different from splashing paint onto a canvas or shaping a block of marble into a statue? There is also a feeling of spiritual connection and release relating to these more extreme forms of body modification. Many people feel more in touch with themselves and nature, as well as peaceful and in harmony, when they are undergoing to the modification, if not afterwards as well. I know personally that getting a tattoo can be a meditative experience. Many mystics have stated that spiritual bliss is one of the most pleasurable experiences in life – and scientists and psychologists have said that pleasure and pain are just opposite sides of the same coin.

IV. So Why Modify?

So why do people modify their bodies? I've touched on the aesthetic reasons, but what is the philosophy behind it? Well, this is quite simple actually. Why settle for something you are unhappy with, when you can change it? Almost everyone dislikes something about his/her body, be it weight, hair color, eye color, skin tone, shape, or in some cases, limbs. So if I can dye my hair or wear colored contacts, why not dye my skin a different color, or stretch out my earlobes to have one inch holes in them, or cut off my left hand? If I don't like the color of my bedroom I paint the walls. If I don't like my left leg, I can cover it in tattoos. If I don't like my lips, I can pierce them. It's as simple as that.

I asked Shannon Larratt, owner and founder of BMEzine, from his experience, what some of the reasons people modify their bodies, specifically in the vein of philosophy and spirituality – his response was thus: “Body modification is about seizing control of how we interface with the world -- by manipulating the form of our bodies we communicate who we are, change the way others interact with us, and even change the way that the world feels to us. Body modification allows a person to fine-tune their biological experience to a surprising degree, both on a sociocultural level, and on a purely physical experiential level. Even if a person does it "because they can", they are still doing these things.”⁵

I also asked Shannon about his own modifications, which he has many of. When asked why he chose to modify his body, he responded “I have the modifications I have because I find them attractive and like the way they feel, and to express to the world by means of my physical form who I am.”⁶

DIY Amputation

But why amputation? DIY amputation is probably the most controversial body modification there is. In the medical community, people who which to amputate body parts are considered to have *Body Integrity Identity Disorder*, or BIID. BIID is simply being unhappy with the way the body is

4 <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,194732,00.html> Fox News: Please Remove My Nonsensical Asian Tattoo

5 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

6 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

shaped, and wanting to amputate a limb in order to fix it. This is considered a very severe mental disorder by the medical community. But, with few exceptions, in the body modification community it is not. One of the “nicer” disagreements with amputation goes “But I have to say, I do not understand the amputations. The risk of infection and the entire idea of lopping off a perfectly healthy and functional body part makes no sense to me. How is this art? I think this crosses the line from art to destructive self-mutilation.”⁷ While this person's disagreement with amputation as a body modification is understandable, I would argue that it is still a close-minded argument. Luckily, in my opinion, for every one person who is morally against the more extreme forms of body modification, there are 10 people who, if they don't do it themselves, support others in it. If the body is another medium for art like canvas is, then why the arguments about certain modifications? Where is the line between cutting up and painting a canvas and cutting and painting my own body?

Taboo's against Extreme Modification

Is the taboo against extreme modification, or even lighter modification like tattoos directly related to western religions? In the East, particularly Asia, body modification is far more common. Foot binding, tattooing, large gauge piercings, and other forms of modification outside of tattooing and piercing go back throughout history in these cultures, and are still practiced culturally in some areas there. I would argue that, similar to the consumption of alcohol and other “light” drugs, body modification is considered a taboo in the West specifically because of religion. As Judeo-Christian-Muslim religion spread in the West, anything related to “pagan” culture and religion was considered evil, heretical, and “wrong.” This included tattooing, and other forms of body modification. But why? Perhaps for the same reason Christmas as other Christian holidays were formed around former pagan holidays? In order to convert populations, many aspects of their culture was either adapted into Christian culture, or deemed heretical and evil.

So why was tattooing deemed “wrong” instead of adapted? This question is worth pondering. Shannon's opinion on the matter is - “I think it's very normal for people to see foreign extreme behavior that they don't understand as mental disorders. Most people are very xenophobic and unable to understand that there is a broad set of acceptable ways to live. I don't see making changes to the body -- a tangible experience that brings people joy and meaning -- as any more of a mental disorder than, say, believing that an invisible superbeing will reward you after death for having following arbitrary and conflicting rules while you live... something that all too many people are convinced is the truth.”⁸

I also asked Shannon about his opinion on the taboo's behind some of the most extreme forms of body modification, like genital mutilation, as well as “bizarre” acts such as the one portrayed in the “Maggot Lover” interview⁹ on ModBlog (run by BMEzine). I think Shannon's take on this simplifies the positive view of these mods quite nicely - “they do these things because they enjoy them and it gets them off.”¹⁰ If I do something to myself that doesn't harm another person in any way, shape, or form, what gives anyone else the right to tell me that it's “wrong?” Nothing.

Are there Right or Wrong Reasons to get Modified?

Are there “right” and “wrong” reasons to get modified? Some would argue yes. One argument is that people should only get modifications that are meaningful in an emotional or spiritual way. But who's to judge what is meaningful or not? It ties directly to the question “why are some mods 'okay' and some not?” The reverse side of the argument though is that if it doesn't affect another person in

7 <http://modblog.bmezine.com/2007/08/13/diy-finger-amputation/> Comment #10.

8 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

9 <http://www.bmezine.com/news/pubring/20070321.html> – View with caution, disturbing photos.

10 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

anyway, it's completely okay to do, which legitimizes all forms of body modification, including amputation.

Another opinion that is sometimes brought up to rail against modifications is that some people, specifically Americans, "copying" traditional tattoos from other cultures (such as Maori facial tattoos, or traditional Japanese Irezumi) is "wrong" and insulting to that culture. I asked Shannon about this, his response was - "First, I think it's unfair to categorize this sort of cultural appropriation as an "American" phenomena, because it happens all over the world. In addition, it happens in reverse, with traditional cultures now mimicking our Western tattoos. Also, while there are many artists working in the styles reminiscent of those in other cultures, on the whole they are presented with a uniquely Western flavor and represent a fusion of cultures. Second, cultures intermixing and borrowing from each other is a large part of how art evolves and moves forward, be it tattoo styles or be it religion or philosophy. I think that the only time an affront comes is when one actively seeks to claim and "misuse" the meaning behind the ritual or art -- and this can include a misuse of the symbols. Simply being inspired by the style is quite reasonable. That said, I think even "affront" may be stronger than I'd like to put it... At worst it's promoting ones own ignorance to appropriate in this way."¹¹

So the idea that there is a wrong reason to get modified, specifically in this case of "copying" traditional tattoos from a culture not your own, is ridiculous. I feel that Shannon expresses it best when he says that "At worst it's promoting ones own ignorance to appropriate in this way." If I want to get a tattoo in a style of another culture, that's nothing wrong with that, because I'm not "stealing" their culture, I'm simply being inspired and influenced by it. Art from all over the world has always been inspiring and influencing art in another part of the world, why should body modification be any different?

V. **Aestheticism**

Aestheticism is a very important philosophy in it's own right, but takes on an even deeper importance when considering body modification. If one mod is pleasing to one person, and not to another, is there any way for them to be compared? Philosophically – no. The only way to do so is relative to myself, so why express my concerns to the other person? According to Heidegger's philosophy I shouldn't, because it's not my place to judge other people¹². So why use the body as a medium for art? Perhaps because it's I can be more connected to it. Or perhaps because it is something that constantly changes, and therefore will always be unique? For someone who does their own modifications it may even be because he/she has more control over his/her own body than over a piece of canvas.

And Aestheticism can take drastic steps as well. ModBlog has featured people who have undergone drastic changes to their physical appearance. "Zombie" for example, covered his entire body in tattoos of exposed flesh, bone, and muscle. Mostly notable, his entire head as been tattooed to look like a fleshless skull with the brain exposed. Why? To use his own words - "I wanted to do the real deal... But I couldn't peel my skin off... So I had to fake it."¹³ He prefers to look like a zombie rather than "normal." Another drastic example is The Lizardman, a performance artist from Austin, Texas who's extensive modifications make him look like a reptile. Interestingly Lizardman also holds a degree in Philosophy and was going to get his doctorate before leaving school to pursue performance art¹⁴. Both of these individuals, as well as many other, have or are currently undergoing complete body transformations. They Aestheticism to a whole new level, and exceed many peoples understanding of

11 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

12 This is a personal theory developed from reading Heidegger's Being & Time and "The Origin of the Work of Art."

13 <http://www.bmezine.com/news/guest/20080318.html>

14 <http://www.thelizardman.com/>

what it is to be human, primarily, because they don't want to be (at least physically). And there are many other examples of people who are doing similar modifications¹⁵.

VI. The Future of Body Modification

So where is body modification going? With the development of small and smaller technology, it seems almost natural that the body modification community will be the beginning of bio-technology. "Cyborgs" isn't necessarily a term only for science fiction anymore. Site's like grinding.be track "technology of the future," as well as speculate on how it will be applied to personal lives. How strange is the idea of implantable computers. Already there is a man in Australia who has an RFID chip implanted in his arm which allows him to lock and unlock his front door without using a key¹⁶. And this is only the beginning. Jim Mielke, of Mielke Product Design, is designing "an implantable, flexible silicon, bluetooth-driven screen" which runs off of converting the energy in the blood¹⁷. This could be used to implant a computer or cell phone in the skin, or even monitor heart rate and other bodily functions.

I asked Shannon about his opinion on the future of body modification, in order to get the opinion of someone who's been involved in the field far longer than I have. When I asked him about the future of modification itself he said "I'm sure it will change in subtle ways as all art does both in terms of how it's expressed and what the various modes of modification are, and that it will reflect the cultures and subcultures of the time, but really, I do not believe that body modification's role has changed much in the last 30,000 years -- it's a low-level way for people to communicate with and express themselves both to others and to themselves. The most profound change that's happened in the last four hundred years is that body modification has become a primarily individualistic activity, rather than a group or familial activity.¹⁸" However, when specifically asked about the future of the integration of body modification and technology, his response was more interesting and in depth.

IEM: Part of my paper discusses the development of future technology in body modification - specifically implanting RFID chips, magnets (which you have personal experience with), and the development of more advanced prosthetic limbs (not just for accident victims, but also for enhancing the body when it's not "necessary"). Site's like <http://www.grinding.be> are already exploring these ideas. What are your views on this exploration and do you have any ideas on these developments yourself?

SL: "On the whole I'm a Luddite and a humanist, not a transhumanist, which is why my personal interest is in the magnetic implant -- a low-tech wetware upgrade that augments the human experience -- versus the RFID implant -- an implanted gadget that interfaces us into the machine world. I believe we are already dangerously close to deposing ourselves with machines that are our superiors, and technological augmentation of the human body gives us the false and dangerous misconception that there can be a peaceful merging of biological intelligence and machine intelligence. I believe that this path will lead to the death of the human experience, and I do not support modern AI research or machine-human integration in any way. I think of all the mistakes of the techno-industrial age, this is our largest mistake.¹⁹"

So why do all of this? Science is constantly trying to potentiality of the body. One modification started in tattoo and piercing parlors rather than the medical field is implanted magnets.

15 <http://deputydog.wordpress.com/2007/08/24/top-10-physically-modified-people-2/>

16 <http://grinding.be/2008/02/15/i-grinder/>

17 <http://grinding.be/2008/02/21/presenting-the-digital-tattoo-interface/>

18 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

19 Shannon Larratt, Interview March 10th, 2008.

Shannon Larratt had magnets implanted into his fingers, entirely for personal reasons. But what are the other possibilities of this? Could implanted magnets be used to run magnetically powered motors or electronics? Perhaps, only time will tell if this will be put into practice, or at least attempted. And new technology is constantly evolving at an alarming rate. Even as I write this, new ideas and technology are appearing in articles like “Regrowing Limbs: Can People Regenerate Body Parts?” at Grinding.be²⁰ or “Self-Experimenters: Self-Styled Cyborg Dreams of Outwitting Superintelligent Machines” on Scientific American²¹. Despite articles like these though, it is questionable as to whether or not these people are thoroughly exploring the possibly consequences of these new ideas.

In a world where humans rely too much on technological advances, is integrating the body and machine the next step? Is it a step that should be taken? Shannon Larratt says no. Personally, I'm not sure, but if it does start to happen, it's something that needs to be explored with both caution, and respect – for both the body, and the technology.

VII. Conclusion

So, in all of this I discovered that it is almost impossible to pinpoint a *single* reason, either philosophical, spiritual, or aesthetic, for body modification. Even individuals, like Shannon Larratt, have listed (or kept private) various reasons behind their own mods. However, the reasons that are given, can be narrowed down into these three different fields I think. So is body modification even something that can be tied down to specific reasons? I think it can.

The majority of more extreme modifications (amputation, genital mutilation, tongue splitting, etc.) are done for what I would call aesthetic reasons. Wanting to change the appearance/functionality of the body, for personal reasons, fall into what I think is one of the purest forms of aestheticism possible. What could be more in the realm of aesthetics than changing my own body to be more comfortable/happy with it?

As far as philosophical reasons for body modification, which aesthetics falls into this, I think there is a broader way to approach the subject. This comes up when discussing taboo's of body modification. What gives someone else the right to tell me what I can and can't do with my own body? The only argument I have heard against the more extreme body modifications is that when someone amputates their own body parts they are making themselves a burden on other people. But if you take the case of Chaz Holder²², he not only was entirely self-sufficient, but was the world's leading designer of lighter, cheaper prosthetic limbs, and donated much of his time to being a doctor in his community, and donated many of the prosthetics he created free to amputees in third world countries. He was also a voluntary self-amputee (which was not known until his death in 2002). So how can this be a valid argument against DIY amputation? Obviously not all cases are the same, but obviously at least some of the people who do it actively don't rely on other people to take care of themselves afterwards.

Body modification is a delicate field to discuss. Almost everyone has an opinion on it, either positive, negative, or ambivalent. But regardless of how anyone feels on the subject, it's obviously going to play a bigger and bigger role in the future, either medically, culturally, or spiritually. I think the most important part is for anyone involved in it to remember that they need to enter it with careful consideration, and respect both for their own body, and the technology involved, either in a simple tattoo, or in implanting RFID chips into their arm.

20 <http://grinding.be/2008/03/19/regrowing-limbs-can-people-regenerate-body-parts/>

21 <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=cyborg-10>

22 http://wiki.bmezine.com/index.php/Chaz_Holder