

Kinesthesia In Motion

Troth sir, I yield you none without words, and words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them.

Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

The AT Lesson

A network of *kiné*¹ receptors dispersed through our body continuously generates signals about position and motion. Our experience of these signals forms our kinesthetic sense. It is our sense of muscle effort, of joint and limb movement.

Kinesthesia is “an elaborate process of integration of information from a variety of sources.” (Dennett, 1991:47) There is no point of focus as in seeing. Kinesthesia is the sense which communicates *back* cerebellar process. It is diffuse, sub-cortical, remote from *left* knowing, wordless. Our senses of sight, sound, taste, touch and smell are well defined and often described in detail. Our kinesthetic sixth sense remains anonymous.² But kinesthesia is a royal road into the interplay among sensation, action and thought. Arousing kinesthesia through *AT* lessons enables conscious access to this elusive, fundamental interplay.

An *AT* pupil performs an ordinary act like sitting or standing. In so doing, he deploys habitual neck muscle tensing that works against his act, making it more difficult. He does this unknowingly, without awareness. The teacher’s gentle manual guidance toward balancing head on torso induces a new, easier motor organization. The pupil is encouraged by touch and word to direct a released extension of his back and to decline unnecessary muscular effort.

As the teacher guides a reorganization of movement away from habitual imbalance toward coordination, the pupil becomes more kinesthetically aware (*right* process) of previously unnoticed muscle tensions (*back* process) that interfere with sitting, standing, talking, breathing. He learns from his own experience that even thinking (*left* process) of an activity initiates habitual tensing.

Over time the pupil develops a practical skill of self-management, applicable in all activity. He discovers easier ways to perform basic movements and actions.

An *AT* lesson induces an awareness of *back* self use. The experience

teaches a way to bypass habitual interference. A pupil chooses to not do habitual maladaptive muscling and to not replace the maladaptive response with another unnecessary tensing. No attempt is made to fix or cure. No exercises, or prescription to a correct way, are given. The aim is to foster, by enhanced kinesthesia, a more efficient, more effective, more natural, more enjoyable self coordination.

An AT Metaphor

Alexander imagines an office clerk attempting to plow a field. If the clerk goes

directly for the desired 'end'...he will [tightly] grip the handles of his plow, set the horses in motion...almost certain to be thrown from side to side by the movements of the plow, which are affected by the hard or soft ground it meets in its progress. [The clerk] will...tense muscles which...should not be tensed and relax those which should do the most work. The tension of the muscles of the arm will almost certainly be unnecessarily tight, and the general use of the wrong muscles will tend to destroy the proper equilibrium rather than to maintain it...He becomes a badly coordinated...plowman...as he was a badly coordinated...clerk. (Alexander, 1918:132)³

In contrast, making a reasoned estimate before plowing of the means to achieve the end, attains proficiency more quickly.

[T]o keep the [blade] embedded and [maintain] a straight furrow... requires first the maintenance of...equilibrium in very difficult circumstances. [The] body must remain comparatively steady and support the arms and legs as the trunk of a tree does its limbs, following as nearly perpendicularly as possible the line the furrow should take. [T]he 'give and take' of the joints of the arms and legs are the chief moving factors which should meet the different movements of the handles of the plow. [An experienced plowboy's] highly trained guiding sensations will not permit him to make more physical tension with any part of the muscular system than is absolutely necessary, and only the particular muscles best adapted for the control of his equilibrium and his plow will be called into special use. (ibid)⁴

Plowing is about handling one's self in passage, about coursing life's road, a metaphor for our moment-to-moment negotiation of life's endless unpredictable encounters. The oncoming ground is rough. As we plow ahead, we must discover how to keep on walking and plowing, how not to be thrown, how to direct our life's blade to a useful furrow.

The horse lends its power. The harness connects us to the horse. The plow shapes the earth to our orders of reason. But how do we induce the horse to trust our directions? A plowboy guides his horse by kinesthetic conversation, extending his own sense of movement through the reins. He sees the process through and makes a reasoned estimate of what is needed at each stage. He directs himself to maintain equilibrium, keep a steady body, allow give and take. His self directions rely on *right* system sensitivity and creativity—and on the *left* system tools of inhibition and volition. He develops guiding sensations that enable him to deploy no more muscle than is necessary. He feels with the horse.

The plowboy learns to anticipate impulses to tense unnecessarily. He learns to inhibit the impulses in order to allow only muscles adapted to the moment. The plowboy's self awareness, sensitivity and poise are his means of establishing communication and cooperation with his animal. He learns that neck reflexes exert irresistible guiding force.⁵ Turn an animal's head, the animal turns in that direction. Pull his head back, the animal stops.

Plowing is also a metaphor for hands-on *AT* teaching. Knowledge from working with horses helps Alexander move a pupil from sitting to standing. Just as neck reflexes allow instruction to a horse, a gentle hand on head and neck elicits a kinesthetic connection with a pupil. An experienced teacher's hands sense the head/neck tension triggered by the pupil's habitual standing and sitting. Through the freedom in his hands—a freedom that depends on the teacher's ability to sense and adapt his own *back* processes—the teacher communicates kinesthetically that the tension is unnecessary. The pupil allows the teacher's extended kinesthesia to propagate. He responds by releasing his interfering tension. The teacher does not control the pupil's release. But when a pupil allows himself to be guided, he discovers his *back*-system ability to sit (stand, walk, talk, breath) more easily—a natural horse-sense alive within him.

Alexander Technique Terms

Back experience teaches. *Right* perception of *back* experience

precedes and prepares *left* representation in language. From repeated experience of reorganized balance, we learn to recognize previously unnoticed habits. As time goes by, we evolve a new understanding and a new language connected to kinesthesia. This languaged understanding interacts reciprocally with future balance experiences.⁶

Use, inhibition, direction, meanswhereby and *sensory appreciation* are terms used by AT teachers to communicate the AT kinesthetic method.

Use

‘Use’ is the way we use our bodies as we live from moment to moment... When we are moving...keeping still... speaking ... thinking ... When we are making love...feeling or refusing to feel pleasure. When we are communicating by actual gestures and attitudes, [and] when unknown to ourselves, our whole bodily mood and disposition tells people what we are like. (W. Barlow, 1990:8)

“Use” is our organization of motion, our verb of poise and balance.

‘Use’ implies a ‘user’ as well as a thing ‘used.’ And this inevitably leads to a reconsideration of the division that we habitually make between ‘mind’ and body.’ Eventually we arrive...at the concept of using oneself. (W. Carrington, 1970:13)

[Use is not limited to] any specific part...but in a much wider and more comprehensive sense applies to the working of the organism in general. (Alexander, *UOS*:4)

A biologist⁷ defines ‘good use’ as “a special case of life processes that ensure fitness, adaptedness, the ability to do the right thing at the right time and in the right place; and misuse as maladapted functioning.” (Tinbergen, 1976:219)

With [a pupil] who has good balance and coordination [an AT teacher] can put a hand on their head, neck or back and what [the teacher] feels is that the whole body musculature seems to function as one unit, where the whole of the back, for example, feels like one unified sheet of elastic which is light and easily moving as the person breathes or moves their arms and legs, rather than the feeling that the back is divided into several separate muscular areas which are almost fighting against one another. (Nicholls, 1991:42).

Inhibition

Alexander: Let me demonstrate.

Pupil: Very well.

Alexander: Sit down. [*The pupil sits down flexing his neck while jerking his head back.*] See that.

Pupil: Yes.

Alexander: If I tell you I can teach you to stop that at once, will you believe me?

Pupil: No, I won't. I have been doing it all my life and I am fifty years of age. If you have had a habit for fifty years, you can't stop it at once.

Alexander: My dear fellow, if I ask you next time to sit down, and you give consent and say 'yes,' you will do it exactly as you have always done it, won't you?

Pupil: Certainly.

Alexander: You do not want to go on doing it like that?

Pupil: No. [*The man stands.*]

Alexander: Very well, next time, when I ask you to sit down, you simply do *not* give consent⁸ to sitting down...

Pupil: No.

(Adaptation, Alexander, *A&L*:166-167)

Change of self-use is enabled by "inhibition," a stopping of habitual unconscious tensing. Not giving consent to sit as one knows it interrupts habitual sitting. By avoiding those muscle patterns associated with sitting, and by allowing the teacher to guide, the pupil becomes receptive to alternatives. Sitting down becomes an exploration of new possibility.

Alexander: When we sit down we [need] not sit down at all...[A]ll [we] have to do to reach the chair is to allow [our] knees to go forward. The next thing is, when we touch the chair, immediately we sit down again [employing our sitting down habit—slumping, leaning against the back or the arm of the chair—in an unconscious response to the chair]...Remember, when you sit down and touch the chair, simply say to yourself 'I am not going to sit down. I am just going to allow the chair to support me'...What we have to do is to learn to think [as well as feel] in activity...But immediately the desire to sit down is so great that you say to yourself, as soon as the idea comes to you, 'Oh, yes, I am going to sit down,' then the old

messages are sent from the brain which are in accordance with your habit, and any possibility of a change in use is stopped...In the beginning of any of these things, we have to prevent that something, whatever it may be...

If you have some habit, like pulling your head back...just wait for a second, inhibit the thought of sitting down, and then say, 'No, instead of sitting down, I am going to decide not to put my head back but to allow my knees to go forward.' (ibid)

Directing Meanswhereby

Alexander: Instead of sitting down, I want you to give certain orders [to think through each step constructively—'let the neck be free,' 'let the head go forward and up,' 'let the back lengthen and widen,']...and then let me, with my hands, do the activity side of it. Allow your knees to go forward and you find you will be sitting down. (ibid)

Alexander's "directions" ask the pupil, before sitting, to make a reasoned estimate of the "meanswhereby" to achieve optimal sitting, just as the experienced plowboy does for plowing. Imagining a free neck and lengthened back focuses the pupil's attention away from the end, sitting, and back to the means that facilitate coordinated action.⁹

Sensory Appreciation

AT lessons foster an open-curiosity about self use, an optimistic attitude with which to reach into physical activity, an attention shift from result to process, from what to how. "When a pupil reaches the point of giving his full attention to the method...he realize[s] the significance of his sensory appreciation." (Dewey, 1918:vi)

Attention to process develops an experiential frame of reference in which kinesthesia comes to life. *Right* awareness of kinesthetic flow facilitates rapport between body and mind, unconscious and conscious. In contrast, attempting results, like telling someone to stand up correctly, imposes a *left* idea which interferes with innate *back* ability. To stand, as we know it, is the end of free standing because it triggers the automatic pilot of habit. This distorts our "sensory appreciation." Habits encourage a sensory numbness. Repetitive actions come and go without notice. Shifting focus back to process, however, arouses *right* exploration of the flow of *back* neuromuscular coordination. We begin to notice our own bodies, as if for the first time. New sensations and feelings emerge. We notice over activity in some parts, under activity

in others. A new *left* understanding emerges out of reawakened *right* sensory appreciation of spontaneous *back* changes.

Teacher Guides, Pupil Allows

The *AT* teacher says to his pupil ‘Let me guide you with my hands.’ He asks for the pupil’s trust, to let himself be drawn into unknown territory. The pupil places trust not only in the teacher, but in his own innate possibilities. Being guided in and out of a chair by someone else’s hands, offers an opportunity to experience muscle deployment beyond habitual action, and to allow innate reflexes (horse sense) to integrate with voluntary movement.

Postural reflexes, breathing activity, habitual muscling are seldom sensed in normal standing and sitting. But, by allowing himself to be guided from sitting to standing to sitting, a pupil can bring this underlying functioning into increasing awareness.¹⁰ Saying “no” to habitual standing, with its anticipatory muscular tensing, fosters a learning opportunity. By trusting innate *back* ability and creative *right* insight, a new possibility emerges. Not attempting any *left* idea of correct standing at a moment of standing, enables *back* expression of a more natural standing.

I had expected...to have my faults of breathing and voice production diagnosed and to be given a set of exercises to correct them. Instead, [my *AT* teacher] chose [to explore my] movement from sitting to standing...He made a few slight changes in the way I was sitting (they seemed...arbitrary...I could not remember afterward what they were). Then, asking me to leave my head as it was, he initiated the upward movement without further [verbal] instruction. Before I had a chance to organize my habitual response...I found myself standing in a position that felt strangely comfortable. I was...conscious...not of being moved by someone else—[my teacher] appeared to be making no effort whatever—but [of being moved] by a set of [my own] reflexes whose operation I knew nothing about. The rate at which I moved seemed paradoxically slower and more controlled and the trajectories that my head and trunk followed were unfamiliar. Most striking...was the sensory effect of lightness...The feeling had not been present at the start, nor had it been suggested to me... breathing became easier...I had glimpsed a new world of experience [beyond] the limited set of movement patterns, attitudes, and responses to which I was accustomed. (Jones, 1976:7-8)

Kinesthetic teaching involves a sensory-motor-cognition triologue. *Left* says “no” to acting directly. *Right* notices. The pupil waits. *Back* releases. The pupil cannot explain what his teacher does to elicit change because it is not the teacher who produces the changes. Nor does an *AT* teacher know what to expect from a pupil, because it is not a specific, direct action of the pupil that effects the change. *AT* teaching is a kinesthetic conversation between teacher and pupil. With inhibition as a foundation, this hands-on teaching fosters a sensory-motor interplay, articulated and implemented through a gentle communion of touch which bypasses habit.

Speaking Hands

The basis from which hands speak
 is the non-action of the teacher.
 That basis is essential.

The quality of the lesson
 is founded on the poise of the teacher.

The hands go out to the muscle postures
 of the pupil and through micro movements,
 tiny touches, particularly placed,
 arouse the kinesthetic sense
 of the pupil and gradually suggest
 ever so slightly—almost imperceptibly—
 the pupil's posture
 into a release,
 a poise,
 a living, enlivening,
 rebirth of comfort,
 flowing pleasant energy.

When the lesson works,
 when my teacher is grounded in his use,
 when his hands talk to my neck, head, shoulders,
 to their sense of themselves,
 their kinesthetic potentials, bringing them to life,
 bringing their livingness to my attention,

They (becoming “I”) let go of
 their superfluous tensions
 that have been their affectation,
 their pretension,
 their posture, attitude, stance,
 and so their prison.

(Ben's *AT* Journal 12/28/93)

By maintaining a neutral tone, the teacher softens the pupil's unconscious resistance. The possibility of *back* balance is communicated through the teacher's hands. Where on a pupil's body a teacher makes contact is less important than how contact is made. "One of the basic principles of [teaching *AT* is] that the amount of kinesthetic information conveyed is in [inverse] proportion to the force used in conveying it." (Jones, 1976:81) The teacher's hands-on contact reassures and guides but does not demand. It elicits an automatic response in the muscle. The pupil resists or releases. It is the pupil who makes the change, not the teacher.¹¹

Indirections

"Indirection" is any process that interrupts the habitual course of events. Indirections, like jokes and free associations, seduce us into situations for which we have no planned response. Indirections include moments that surprise, moments that lead to insight or laughter and moments that simply shift focus away from habitual striving.

The *AT* Chair lesson is not a formula for correct sitting. When the teacher guides the pupil in and out of a chair, it is the interruption of the pupil's sitting habit that clears the way for spontaneous change, for new learning. And it is through not predetermining where to place attention that *right* awareness rediscovers the *back* processes involved in sitting and standing. A more global, less focused attention allows unnoticed kinesthesia of muscle and joint to flicker into awareness. Indirection encourages new perspective, enabling a more alive, more accurate self-awareness.¹² Inhibiting habitual tensing is the indirect means that promotes more efficient, more coordinated use.

The Role of Thought

Inhibition, a conscious not-doing of habit, is not an action that requires doing something. Quite the contrary. The pupil is asked to not do anything, to not replace unnecessary tension with another form of tensing. The pupil is simply encouraged to allow inherent *back* coordination to emerge and function. The executive power of *left*—in issuing the command to inhibit—moves *left* out of the action, out of *back*'s natural way.

During sitting and standing, teacher and pupil work together with intrinsically related elements: self-awareness, attitude, kinesthetic experience, bio-mechanics, volition and sensation. Softly noticing a

spontaneous release just after it occurs initiates a constructive retrospection of unnecessary interference and encourages *right* visions of new horizons. Eventually, awareness persists beyond lessons. By patient repetition, by casualness, by conscious inhibition of habitual response, by timely naming, awareness of *back* system balance develops into a *right* insight and finally *left* ideas which can be recognized, remembered and used.

Freud's Horse

The horse learns what the rider knows.

The rider feels what the horse can do.

The rider reaches down into the horse
and joins the horse's vitality,
the deep vitality which in every on going moment
is infinite, eternal and immortal.

The horse rises up in the rider,
becomes knowing of what it can be,
becomes intelligent,
avails itself of memory, imagination, reason.

What does a rider give a horse?
Memory of time and place.
Imagination of possible futures.
Reason for weighing, negotiating, choosing.

What does a horse give a rider?
Life, vitality, energy,
Infinity now
in being,
the only antidote
to civilization's discontent
of death.

(Ben's AT Journal, 2/8/93)