



II

ROLF, ALEXANDER AND "BODY-EGO"



Anne Clarke

It would be better to consider the body as an "ego" than to consider the mind as such, for the body seems to last for a year, two years, or a hundred years, but that which is called mind, thought or knowledge, appears and disappears in a perpetual state of change.¹

I would like to share some observations, as case historian, on the development of my body as "ego" over the course of the last few years. I hope these may somehow resonate or be a spur to some teacher or to some seeker like myself, even knowing that each must come to these things in his own good time. I'm glad we live in an age when the body is being honored as a repository and touchstone of the senses, when it is recognized as the primary material given with which to work. All awareness rests on the fact of this physical body. So, while I'm no special example and no completed project, I see overwhelming possibilities and would ask you to look where I've been looking. At mid-century, for myself, I feel a tide has been reversed, time works for me, and ahead is a slope which seems to lead to an inviting plateau "whose margin fades forever and forever as I move".

I first worked with movement and "body awareness" with Charlotte Selver, Tina Keller, and Mary Whitehouse nearly ten years ago, and experienced something of what the body can feel, show and communicate to oneself and to others. Who can say what this body-ego then was? I couldn't bear to really look at it, though through it I had had many freeing and growing experiences. I had found I could walk to my own beat amid music and people of different tempo. I had relished the freedom of movement and had also learned that form may offer limits which are an invitation to fulfillment rather than a restriction. It's so often not what you do, but how you do it.

But still there was this physical being I would always look away from. I had somehow gone wrong. I didn't have a firm foundation in the way feet met the support of earth. Upward progressed the sagging ankles, the twisted knees, the gross thighs, the unbalanced hips, the arched back, the compressed chest, the shoulders tight and high and rounded narrowly, the forward thrust of neck and chin. The legs, particularly, so visible and misshapen and awry on their joints in spite of efforts to "improve" them, I didn't want to acknowledge as part of me. This dissatisfaction and real rejection made me open and eager when Mary Whitehouse talked with me of her experiences with the Rolf work in Structural Integration.

Supported by what I suppose was the simple initial euphoria of added oxygen through beginning release of constrictions over the ribcage, then by the excitement of change, I was largely able to accept, identify with, and absorb what has been called the "elbow jabbing, thumb gouging" pain. In fact, there was such confidence in the practitioner's seeing eyes and knowing hands, and such a feeling that what was being done was right and needed to be done and was something I was utterly unable to do for myself, that much of the pain was welcomed as token of an accomplishing process. What I felt under the hands was a literal "sculpturing of the body" in the Mensendieck terminology if not quite its context. Three times in the series of ten sessions, there were tears, not idle tears and not from pain. I can only say they seemed release from some unknown holding or some defensive put-down that had got physically incorporated. Possibly it was an awareness that armour had been breached and needn't be rebuilt that was at the root of the release. This always occurred from work on the left side. "Of course, your intuitive side," said a friend, "And now maybe you'll be more able to trust this side of you."

As the work progressed and I became aware of changes, I looked with new vision and saw for the first time so many bodies in need. I came to realize that ten sessions were really only a beginning. After the interval of rest following the initial series, I continue on a one a month basis and feel the work is still miraculously, specifically right, still needed and still accomplishing.

Things were better and different, but all that distance still to go. And was I using my body differently? Basically, I'm afraid, much as before. Beyond my participation in absorbing the Rolf "processing" (dreadful term which makes the body object, separate and other), I felt I was a bystander and no direction or implementation was from me. Again, when the pupil is ready, the teacher appears. There came word of the Alexander Technique and a teacher. For me, this method supplies elements that had seemed somehow lacking, focus and participation.

It's hard to convey how one participates in a technique which is described as essentially a non-doing. Alexander's "conscious control" applies to the non-doing of wrong things. It is this "doing" which is to be inhibited. The ends, the goals, are given up for the process, the "means whereby". One is strongly reminded of wu wei, non-striving, the Taoist "do nothing and nothing will be left undone". Or of Herrigel, for whom, after five years, "It" loosed the arrow to the mark with the "unmoved movement".²

There are three concurrent "commands" which implement Alexander's work. Let neck be free allows both the head to be released upward and the shoulders to widen outward, but may have eventual ramifications through the whole spinal column. When the neck is more free, head can follow the suggestion Head forward and up (shades of Coué and the power of positive thinking), which is again not something which is done, but thought. "Forward and up" refers to the relationship of the head to the neck, the neck being freed to be more erect and relatively back, and the back of the head to assume a position relatively forward to its previous relationship with the neck. The head in the profile plane makes a slight forward rotation while rising upward, off the neck. As a result the area where spine meets skull becomes open and free. It simply happens. Let back lengthen and widen, sometimes considered as two commands, brings the focus on an extension of the spine upward from the pelvis to the forward and up head, and the widening is sensed in the "untilting" of the pelvis and the outward expansion of the back of the ribcage, particularly in breathing. Both the lengthening and widening tend against curvature of the spine and the consequent narrowing and shortening of the back.

The hands of the teacher on the student gently discourage the wrong doings while they give the clue and impulse to Non-Doing, which leads to right doings. This is carried out with the student on the table, where one more easily gives up holding, and directs-- hears and thinks the commands--while being moved and sensing the feel of the movement. In the chair while the student directs, the teacher moves him forward and back, and also through rising and sitting. All impulses toward movement originate physically as well as mentally with the head. Even as the movement of the tail of the salamander starts with the head, so the impulse to leave the chair passes to the knee, hip and ankle joints, and one rises. The torso, shoulders and neck are an uninvolved, non-doing unit supporting the head upward. When the neck-shoulder-back area is freed from strain and not wrongly involved in tense participation in work that is not properly theirs, the field is clear for the functioning parts, the joints, to perform their roles. Energy has not been diverted or depleted, but goes with economy to the point where movement occurs. Parallel experiences occur in activities begun in the standing position--the lunge, the monkey tilt, the

squat. Walking with "up" becomes a joy.

This free-forward-up-lengthening in all activities--for it is "up to go down" as well as "up to go up"--results in an extraordinary sense of lightness and ease. An underlying focus has been supplied and you vacuum with "up", type with "up", do Mensendieck, T'ai Chi Ch'uan or meditate with "up". Unexpected benefits occur. The surprised pleasure at the ease of rolling up out of bed in the morning starts the day in a positive way. Fatigue lessens through the economy in effort, less sleep is required, more is accomplished, the eyes seem more clear and mobile.

Alexander found, as do his teachers, that from establishment of this basic proper relationship between the neck, head and back, which I believe exactly corresponds to the Rolf objective of correct relationship with gravity, all things follow. In time. For instance, specific work with the feet is not done because these, eventually, with proper use, right themselves. The prospect is limitless.

Today, all the lessons and the processes are continuing and the Rolf work seems more than ever important now that I feel so clearly how increased freeing, in breadth and depth, translates to the new dynamics of movement. Legs are straightening incredibly, visibly, and shoulders widening outward. The "body-ego" grows self-accepting, self-approving, self-loving--"Existence, consciousness, Bliss". The feeling of well-being seems to lead to widening horizons of acceptance, approval and love of the world. I regret any competition there may be between the two techniques or any defensive, aggressive, exclusive criticisms each of the other. I feel that in me they are working together, synergistically, as I work with them. What each might achieve separately is not as much as is being accomplished together, and that certainly, together, changes occur much, much more swiftly. These two may even need each other.

As the organism develops a balance within itself and orients to work with gravity, it becomes a truer sensor and establishes a spontaneous uncalculated, ungrasping responsiveness to the environment. We do not then, overreact, go running around with our faces hanging out, grinning for approbation, sawing the air with our arms for emphasis. As Charlotte Selver says, when the response is true, the smallest gesture becomes enormous. We experience afresh each time with this body which is, quite simply, what and all we are.

The more we are open for insight and spontaneity, the less we consider ourselves as problems; the less we judge ourselves, the less we judge others. Acceptance compounds. Individual ecology changes. A potential for freedom is given in which each can be

himself and find his place. One begins to feel what one may have glimpsed intellectually, that one is not other than the world, that the parts cannot be separated from the whole, the seamless cloth cannot be cut, nor the "interdependent originations" sorted out. These two powerful, righting techniques have, I believe, been the basis in me of a personal optimism and unitary feeling I would never have thought possible.

¹ Saying attributed to the Buddha, quoted in The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects by Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Yongden.

² Eugen Herrigel, Zen in the Art of Archery.

* * * * *