

Awareness Through Movement

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Excerpt

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IMPROVEMENT OF ABILITY

The lessons are designed to improve ability, that is, to expand the boundaries of the possible: to turn the impossible into the possible, the difficult into the easy, and the easy into the pleasant. For only those activities that are easy and pleasant will become part of a man's habitual life and will serve him at all times. Actions that are hard to carry out, for which man must force himself to overcome his inner opposition, will never become part of his normal daily life: as he gets older he will lose his ability to carry them out at all.

It is rare, for instance, for a man over fifty to jump over a fence, even if it is quite low. He will look for the way around the fence, while a youth will jump over it without any difficulty.

This does not mean that we should avoid everything that seems difficult and never use our will power to overcome obstacles, but that we should differentiate clearly between improvement of ability and sheer effort for its own sake. We shall do better to direct our will power to improving our ability so that in the end our actions will be carried out easily and with understanding.

ABILITY AND WILL POWER

To the extent that ability increases, the need for conscious efforts of the will decreases. The effort required to increase ability provides sufficient and efficient exercise for our will power. If you consider the matter carefully you will discover that most people of strong will power (which they have trained for its own sake) are also people with relatively poor ability. People who know how to

operate effectively do so without great preparation and without much fuss. Men of great will power tend to apply too much force instead of using moderate forces more effectively.

If you rely mainly on your will power, you will develop your ability to strain and become accustomed to applying an enormous amount of force to actions that can be carried out with much less energy, if it is properly directed and graduated. Both these ways of operating usually achieve their objective, but the former may also cause considerable damage. Force that is not converted into movement does not simply disappear, but is dissipated into damage done to joints, muscles, and other sections of the body used to create the effort. Energy not converted into movement turns into heat within the system and causes changes that will require repair before the system can operate efficiently again.

Whatever we can do well does not seem difficult to us. We may even venture to say that movements we find difficult are not carried out correctly.

TO UNDERSTAND MOVEMENT WE MUST FEEL, NOT STRAIN

To learn we need time, attention, and discrimination; to discriminate we must sense. This means that in order to learn we must sharpen our powers of sensing, and if we try to do most things by sheer force we shall achieve precisely the opposite of what we need.

When learning to act we should be free to pay attention to what is going on inside us, for in this condition our mind will be clear and breathing

easy to control; there is no tension engendered by stress. When learning is carried out under conditions of maximum effort, and even this does not seem enough, there is no longer any way of speeding up action or making it stronger or better, because the individual has already reached the limit of his capacity. At this point breathing is arrested; there is superfluous effort, little ability to observe, and no prospect of improvement.

In the course of the lessons the reader will find that the exercises suggested are in themselves simple, involving only easy movements. But they are intended to be carried out in such a way that those who do them will discover changes in themselves after the first lesson.

SHARPENED DISCRIMINATION

"A fool cannot feel," said the Hebrew sages. If a man does not feel he cannot sense differences, and of course he will not be able to distinguish one action and another. Without this ability to differentiate there can be no learning, and certainly no increase in the ability to learn. It is not a simple matter, for the human senses are linked to the stimuli that produce them so that discrimination is finest when the stimulus is smallest.

If I raise an iron bar I shall not feel the difference if a fly either lights on it or leaves it. If, on the other hand, I am holding a feather, I shall feel a distinct difference if the fly were to settle on it. The same applies to all the senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste, heat, and cold.

The exercises here are intended to

reduce effort in movement, for in order to recognize small changes in effort, the effort itself must first be reduced. More delicate and improved control of movement is possible only through the increase of sensitivity, through a greater ability to sense differences.

THE FORCE OF HABIT

It is extremely difficult to correct a faulty habit of posture or movement even if it has been clearly recognized. For both the fault and the way in which it appears in action must be corrected. We need a great deal of persistence and enough knowledge to enable us to move according to what we know rather than according to habit.

THINKING WHILE ACTING

In my lessons the student learns to listen to the instructions while he is actually carrying out an exercise and to make the necessary adjustments without stopping the movement itself. In this way he learns to act while he thinks and to think while he acts. This is a step up in the ladder of ability from the man who stops thinking while he does something and stops acting when he wants to think. (An experienced driver can easily carry out instructions while he is driving, while a beginner has difficulty doing this.)

FREEING AN ACTION OF WASTED ENERGY

An efficient machine is one in which all the parts fit together accurately; all are properly oiled, with no grit or dirt between adjacent surfaces; where all the fuel used is turned into kinetic energy up to the thermodynamic limit; and where there is no noise or vibration, that is, no energy is wasted on useless movement that cuts down the effective operating power of the machine.

The exercises we are about to begin are intended to achieve just this,

to gradually eliminate from one's mode of action all superfluous movements, everything that hampers, interferes with, or opposes movement.

In the systems of teaching generally accepted today, emphasis is placed on achieving a certain aim at any price, without regard for the amount of disorganized and diffused effort that has gone into it. So long as the organs of thought, feeling, and control are not organized for action that is coordinated, continuous, smooth, and efficient--and therefore also pleasant--we are involving parts of the body indiscriminately, even if they are in no way required for this action or even interfere with it. One result is that we quite often perform an action and its opposite at the same time. Only mental effort can then make the part that is directed toward the goal overcome the other parts of the body operating to frustrate it. In this way, unfortunately, will power may tend to cover up an inability to carry out the action properly. The right way is to learn to eliminate the efforts opposing the goal and to employ will power only when a superhuman effort is required.

We shall come back to this point when the reader has proved it to himself through his own experience; he will then be able to progress further along the desired road.

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