

Where IT Is AT

I do not profess to offer a finally perfected theory... We are only at the beginnings of understanding.

F.M. Alexander

We are in the situation of a zoologist who wants to know what ought to be the meaning of “fish” in order to make fishes one of the great classes of vertebrates.

Charles Peirce

What is AT?

Alexander believed he had found a new field of inquiry—a method which could alter and improve sensation, attitude and action.¹ He called it psycho-physical education. His followers call it the Alexander Technique. We call it AT.

An AT lesson demonstrates that transformations of feeling are physical. Repeatedly, in a half-hour lesson, a simple change of body balance, or release of muscle tension, led Ben to deep comfort, inner peace, a sense of security. These experiences imply that physical balance and psychological feeling are linked.

The postural relationships explored in an AT lesson enter rich inner systems. Ben arrives for his lesson in one mental state, leaves in another. But how does changing muscle function impact emotional life? There seem few words to describe the experience of integration that AT lessons evoke.

Ben’s “inner peace” response to AT is not unusual. Frank Pierce Jones reports “a sense of well being” from his AT lessons. John Dewey reports an “enlightened spontaneity” that facilitates “genuine self expression.”² What does AT do that leads to well being? Can we say what it is? Can we write about it?

Id, Ego, Superego and AT

What is the generic element with which Alexander’s work works? When Freud sought a word for the unconscious physical process that governs the continuity of mind and body, he drew on Groddeck’s *Book of the IT*. (Freud, 1923:13) Groddeck’s IT became Freud’s “id” in his id-ego-superego triologue of impulse, idea and obligation.

Id stands for immediate instinctual drive, the pervading irresistible forces of sex and hunger, the influence of bodily drives in mind. Superego stands for parental and cultural indoctrinations and obligations, the imposition of society in mind. Ego stands for perception, motility, individuation, cognition, volition and decision, the construction of self in mind.

We find an additional process of self in mind—a body self. We call it *AT*. Hereafter, when we use *AT*, it signifies more than just an acronym for Alexander Technique:

AT stands for regulation of muscle activity, manifest in innate reflex and learned reaction. Muscle activity affects and is part of our breathing, posture, sensations, emotions and thinking. *AT* is the ongoing process which coordinates balance, action and attitude.

AT is an abstraction of forces that control muscle activity, as id is an abstraction of forces that control sex and hunger. Like id drive, *AT* process exerts continuous, unconscious, influence on self-perception and self-management. Although subconscious, *AT* is accessible and malleable. *AT* education is *AT* management, as psychoanalysis is ego, id, superego management.

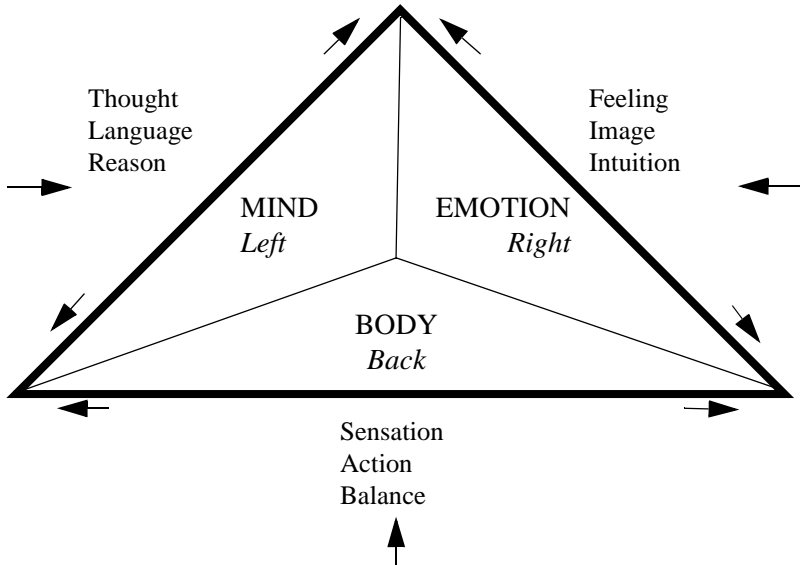
Experience is a conversation among these self aspects. This conversation is not just mind/body (reason-to-action), the cognitive scientist's emotion-less theory. Nor only emotion/body (feeling-to-behavior), the artist's mind-less imagination. Nor only emotion/mind (feeling-to-thought), the priest and psychotherapist's body-less psyche. It is all three at once, together in one continuous, interconnected three way communication.

Left, Right, Back Triologue

Separating “mind” and “body” is a habit embedded in language. To speak of “the brain” is to speak of an entity with location and boundary. The use of “the” implies a separate part, static and unchanging.

We want language that implies process, function and flow rather than location, boundary and stasis. “Mind” is a process, a system. “Brain” is more than physical substance. It functions. Although brain parts have location (left and right cortex, back cerebellum, central amygdala, anterior cingulate) where certain functions dominate (reasoning, intuiting, coordinating, feeling), parts interact and depend on one another. Systems are not limited to location. Functions are not bound to systems.

The Triologue



Each System Interacts With External Sensory, Physical and Societal Influences

Figure 1-1

To explicate *AT*, we distinguish three modes, and a core, of consciousness that comprise sensation-body-mind process—each with a physical focus and distinct characteristics:

- Left-system* refers to the thinker of thoughts, the acknowledged source of reason, the known home of mind (anchored in the left cortex).
- Right-system* refers to the mediator of perception, intuition and feeling (anchored in the right cortex, amygdala and anterior cingulate).
- Back-system* refers to the coordinator of body balance and motion (anchored in the cerebellum and basal ganglia).
- Under* refers to the core subsystem beneath *right*, *back* and *left* of which we think little but feel much. Way down inside of *right* is *under*, our silent, urging worm. Last in thinking, but first in feeling “yes” or “no,” *under* is our digestive, reproductive, visceral self, our gut feeling.

Left and *right* refer to cortical systems of thought and perception. *Back* is the home of *AT* process.

Consciousness is complex, a land of feelings, actions and thoughts; viscera, muscles and nerves; urges, kinesthesia and imagination. The terrain is etched with an infinity of detail, influences and counter-influences, actions and reactions. We distinguish *left*, *right* and *back* to reconnoiter the terrain. *Left*, *right* and *back* are not Alexander's concepts. We use them as points of reference to navigate the maze of feelings, actions and thoughts that emerge during an *AT* lesson. *Left*, *right*, *back* (and *under*) are interactive aspects of mind that operate all the time. They are inseparable. They function in unison.

Left: Our Thinking Self

The brain we recognize as our own is our *left* cortex idea of self: thinking, planning, directing, doing. This self looks behind and ahead, invents time, connects past and future. This thinking self works on a short term memory of five or six entries. That is the largest number of different entities we can keep in view at any moment. This short term memory, however, is richly supported by information accumulated over a life time, access to which depends on how our data are filed and on the efficacy of our theories for recovering them. Our *left* self distills and organizes the profuse data of raw experience into succinct ideas, constructs theories from which infinite predictions of probable experience are deduced as needed. To make distinct decisions, to concentrate on one thing at a time, *left* excludes *right* and *back*. These exclusions liberate *left* thought. But the freedom is illusory. Although we exploit *left's* narrowed views as objective, they are, in fact, mere fictions created to be useful. *Left's* fiction's are useful most of the time. But *left's* exclusions cost dearly, because they alienate us from our vital *right* and *back* experiences.

Right: Our Intuitive Self

Next door to *left*, unperturbed by *left's* rights and wrongs, *left's* extended time, or *left's* exclusions, is our *right* cortex sense of self: intuition, imagination, inspiration. In our *right* mind, past and present are merged. There are no passages of time. Perceptions bypass words. Impressions come before and go beyond logic. There is no time but now.

Right system riches are comprehensible to *left* only sometimes. But, despite *left's* attempts to exclude them, *right* insights find expression through condensation (collapsing multiple experiences into single

symbolic representations), displacement (shifting self-aspects onto others) and reversal (where “no” and “yes” change places). *Right* provokes and nourishes *left* reasoning. But *right* is also the source of *left*'s confusion.

Back: Our Acting Self

Behind the frontal systems stands the *back* cerebellar self, our embodied self. *Back* lives in muscle activity. Without *back* there is no balance, no movement. *Back* puts emotion and thought into action. *Back* is also the distributor of energy. While *back* depends on *left* and *right* for information, information could find no application without *back*.

Under: Our Core Self

Finally, there is our fundamental livingness beneath *right*, *back* and *left*. *Under* is our primal urge, our taken breath, our heartbeat, our life-sustension, our visceral self.

Right, Back and Left Interaction:

A Metaphor of Evolution

Consciousness evolves from simple *under* reactions to a system of *right*, *back*, *left* specialization and cooperation.

I begin (before there is an “I”) as a worm that waits for food. All I am is my gut brain. I call it *under*. It's always there, doesn't know much, a squirm of the moment that mostly complains. It's where my urges and my pains emerge and live.

But then I evolve. I grow muscle and bone. I move and seek, grab, fight and flee. I grow a second brain, a muscle-skeleton *back* brain. My *under* worm and emerging *back* form a working relationship. *Back* cannot escape *under*'s hunger and pain—must move accordingly. *Back* cannot resist *under*'s procreative surges—must move accordingly.

My survival benefits from improved tactics in search of food and procreation. The communication between *under* and *back* grows bigger and better and gradually evolves a *front* brain—a *front* for *back*. *Front* is different from *back* in that it specializes in perception and visualization.

Now I have three brains: first *under*, then *back*, then *front*. But that is not the end. “I” discover that thinking ahead, foresight, is good for survival. The better I think ahead, the better I survive.

So I divide *front* into *left* and *right*. I isolate the planning, administrating, foreseeing function of *front*, specialize it on my *left*

side. The imagining, perceiving and feeling function of *front* I leave on my *right* side.

Left capitalizes on narrow mindedness. In order to be foresightful, to be able to figure out, *left* overlooks almost everything that *right* experiences. *Left* fabricates fictions, invents simple models of how things probably are and may become. *Left* interprets sensory awareness to suit its fancy, navigating through time and space according to these inferential illusions.

Along my way, *right* receives and absorbs everything that happens in and to me, including my transactions with *under* and *back*. Compared to little, narrow, tidy, timely *left*, *right* is enormous, rich and, also, infinitely confusing.

There is no time or space in *right*. Everything that has ever happened in or to me, any time, anywhere is always here and now. Everything is connected to everything else in a million ways, deep and shallow, serious and silly. And, because there are no distinctions in *right*, everything is always also its opposite.

Left is a quiet, secure office of serious thinking, a disciplined laboratory. *Right* is a raw, noisy, endless, undisciplined jungle where everything grows and anything goes. It is *right's* appetite to listen to *back* and *under*, to assess their need and follow their lead. But *left* is commissioned to edit most of the news coming from *right* in order to protect its carefully thinking mind from raw confusion, in order to keep itself clear for practical, foresightful planning.

Of what *right* contains, *left* knows almost nothing. This is what enables *left* to believe that what-little-it-knows is enough to be construed as all-that-is-important. *Right*, on the other hand—rife with ripe suspicions, apt hunches and penetrating intuitions—has so much in store that it cannot “think” of what it contains, cannot sort it out.

(Ben's *AT* Journal, 1/22/96)