

## Chapter 6

# Ah

*The elements of the human soul and the particles of a human body are indivisible.* Stanislavski

*Nature does not work in parts; she treats everything as a whole.*

Alexander

*Every observation is necessarily one-sided, every opinion a falsification. The act of observing disintegrates a whole into different fields of observation...to arrive at an opinion one must first dissect a whole and then disregard certain of its parts... [Instead] we are trying to recover the earlier conception of a unit, the bodymind, and make it the foundation of our theory and action... We understand man better when we see the whole in each of his parts, and we get nearer to a conception of the universe when we look upon him as part of a whole.*

Groddeck

*Self...is a perpetually recreated neurobiological state.*

Damasio

## A Moment To Moment Flow

Psyche and soma are one. The indivisible unity of the human organism is demonstrated in lifting an arm, walking, talking, learning something, thinking out a problem, making a decision. (Alexander, *UOS*:3)

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A young woman

suffered from rigid paralysis, accompanied by loss of sensation in both extremities on the right side of her body: and the same trouble from time to time affected her on her left side. Her eye movements were disturbed and her power of vision was subject to numerous restrictions. She had difficulties over the posture of her head; she had a severe nervous cough. She had an aversion to taking nourishment, and on one occasion she was for several weeks unable to drink in spite of a tormenting thirst. Her powers of speech were reduced, even to the point of her being unable to speak or understand her native language. Finally, she was subject to conditions of 'absence', of confusion, of delirium, and of alteration of her whole personality... She would take up the glass of water that she longed for, but as soon as it touched her lips she would push it away like someone suffering from

hydrophobia. As she did this, she was obviously in an ‘*absence*’ for a couple of seconds. (Freud, 1909:32-36)

From somatic signs—paralysis, eye movement, head posture—Freud infers psychic state. By addressing psychic state, Freud interrupts habitual response. This “bring[s] about the disappearance of the painful symptoms of her illness” thus demonstrating the indivisibility of body-mind. (ibid:36)<sup>1</sup>

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Actors attend to the meaning of events which others take for granted. A simple activity like sitting on a chair must come to life. A turn of the head, a movement of the eyes, must communicate, acquire social meaning, humanity.<sup>2</sup> The moment to moment flow of thought, word and gesture demonstrate the indivisible unity of the human organism. Eleonora Duse, playing Magda, is confronted by a man who knows her humiliating secret.

Then a terrible thing happened to her. She began to blush; and in another moment she was conscious of it, and the blush was slowly spreading and deepening until, after a few vain efforts to avert her face or to obstruct his view of it without seeming to do so, she gave up and hid the blush in her hands. (Shaw, 1895, cited in Le Gallienne, 1966:137)

Shaw saw Duse in 1895. Reviewers in 1896 and 1908 describe Duse’s blushing in identical terms. Duse’s blush expresses Magda’s emotion anew at each performance, recreating a living fusion of psyche, soma and behavior. How does Duse do this? When Magda is confronted (a *psychic* event), Duse allows Magda to be deeply embarrassed (an *emotional* state), evoking a blush (a *somatic* process)—ordinarily an involuntary response—followed by “vain efforts to avert her face,” (a *behavior*). The behavior appears natural. Duse does it “without seeming to.” She does not produce a blush by holding her breath. Instead, she opens herself to spontaneous organic experience, in the theatre, at that moment.

## Stanislavski’s “Method”

Konstantine Stanislavski (1863-1938) uses *right* imagery to reach preverbal *back* experience.<sup>3</sup> “Our feelings and emotional experiences are changeable and incapable of being grasped. What you have seen is much more substantial. Images are much more easily and firmly fixed in our visual memories and can be recalled at will.” (Stanislavski, AAP:61)

# Stanislavski's Embodied Characters

Top: as Satin in *Lower Depths*. Bottom: as Ostrovski in *The Last Sacrifice*.  
Drawings by Julie Paparella

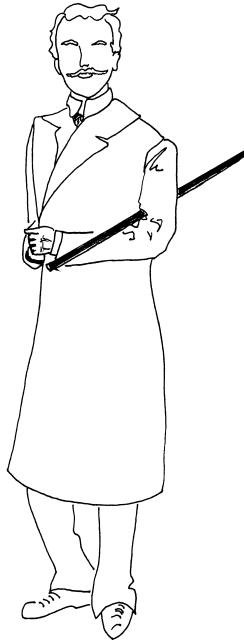


Figure 6-1

In “the method,” an actor responds to an imagined moment as if it were actual. He recalls an image unique to his life experience. This *right* image affects emotional experience. (Damasio, 1994:136-138) The image signals primary emotion centers to activate autonomic central and peripheral nerves, send motor signals to *back* skeletal muscle effecting facial expression and body posture and activate adrenal and other visceral *under* systems which change the actor’s body and brain states.

### An Actor’s Preparation

Imagine	$\alpha$ (alpha)	Personal images lead to
React	$\beta$ (beta)	memories and associations,
Sense	$\gamma$ (gamma)	which change feeling states.
Manifest	$\delta$ (delta)	This affects body responses (smiling, blushing),
Initiate	$\epsilon$ (epsilon)	to initiate a flow of new consciousness and
Express	E	new expressiveness.

Table 6-1

## Indirect Methods to Influence and Guide

Actors show how communication is more than its parts. The words, facial expressions, vocal prosody and gestures (studied separately in linguistics, psychology and neurology) may be essential. But Duse’s communication reflects her whole experience at that moment, a triologue of feeling-body-mind inseparably fused in her performance. This genuine experience within Duse arouses an empathic, bodily response in her audience.

Stanislavski discovers that an actor’s ability to communicate with whole expression is not a gift. It is available to everyone and teachable by indirect means.

The great actor should be full of feeling, and especially he should feel the thing he is portraying. He must feel an emotion not only once or twice...but every time he plays it, no matter whether it is the first or the thousandth time. Unfortunately this is not within our control. Our [*right*] subconscious is inaccessible to our [*left*] consciousness. We cannot enter into that realm. If for any reason we

do penetrate into it, the subconscious becomes conscious and dies... Fortunately there is a way out. We find the solution in an oblique instead of a direct approach. In the soul of a human being there are certain elements which are subject to consciousness and will. These accessible parts are capable in turn of acting on psychic processes that are involuntary...there is a special technique...we must know how to not interfere. (Stanislavski, *AAP*:13-14)

Alexander comes to the same discovery. Self observation with a mirror showed Alexander that he had been unaware of the postural concomitants that provoked his voice loss. Rethinking and reviewing how to move and speak leads him to awareness of a *right-back-left* triologue.

When I began...I conceived of ‘body’ and ‘mind’ as separate ... But...I saw that the defects in my reaction...which I ... tried to change by [a] direct method...were not primarily due to defects in the use...of the parts...(in my case the vocal organs), but were the indirect result of...my general functioning, and...the working of the musculature of the whole organism. (Alexander, *UOS*: 3)

Alexander noticed vocal and respiratory misuse in himself and others—“tension of the facial muscles, depression of the larynx, and lack of controlled motive-power...[It is] almost impossible for the ordinary person to sing ‘Ah’ correctly. Most people will have observed the serious facial expression of the singer, in many most painful to see.” (1906, *A&L*:44) Since the processes of posture and respiration are “unconsciously controlled,” they “can only be met by... indirect means.” (Alexander, op. cit.:45-46)

## **A Calm, Clear Intelligence**

### **A Ready Adaptive Outlook**

When a pupil comes to an *AT* teacher with a specific problem, the task is to not focus on that specific but to arouse, instead, a general awareness of malcoordination that permeates the pupil’s activity and impacts a variety of specific conditions.

“Sub-conscious self” is an “aggregate” of “habits of mind, with their resulting habits of body.” (Alexander, *MSI*:21) Habitual attitude, however, can be brought indirectly to awareness and then influenced. Shifting attention to self process can bypass habitual attitude and habitual body response. The perspective sought is not a concentration which

calls for effort, nor a narrowing of focus, nor any attempt to produce a correct breathing or posture. Instead what is invited is “a calm, clear, open-eyed intelligence, a ready, adaptive outlook.” (ibid)<sup>4</sup> “What we are trying to encourage...is the practice of non-doing...Non-doing is, above all, an attitude of mind. It’s a wish. It’s a decision to leave everything alone and see what goes on, see what happens.” (Carrington, 1994:134)

[T]o apprehend and control mental habits, the first and only real difficulty is to overcome the preliminary inertia of mind in order to combat the subjective habit. The brain becomes used to thinking in a certain way, it works in a groove, and when actuated, slides along the familiar, well-worn path; but if once it is lifted [out of the groove]...it is astonishing how easily it may be [re]directed. At first it will have a tendency to return to the old groove and work as before by means of one mechanical, unintelligent operation, but the groove soon fills, and though, thereafter, we may be able to use the old path, if we choose, we are no longer bound to it. (Alexander, *MSI*:27-28)

## Diffuse Awareness What Only Inattention Can Encompass

We bring our habitual mind-set (and its body-set) to every act, every situation. As an *AT* teacher guides a pupil to new self-use, the new use arouses a new awareness. As we taste this new awareness, we turn our habitual mind-set toward it. But our habitual mind-set has difficulty comprehending the new awareness. The more we grab for it—the more we concentrate—the more elusive is the new experience. Our narrowing *left* concentration excludes the new *right* awareness. This provokes a “strained expression...anxiety...excited fear reflexes.” (Alexander, *CCCI*:107) “Sub-conscious [spontaneity] becomes conscious and dies.” (Stanislavski) Instead of specifics, Alexander guides attention continuously out to the whole. This *right* abductive play releases our ability to be aware of many things at the same time. (Alexander, *CC-CI*:110)

Focused attention is by intention narrow, deliberately blurring everything beyond its focal point. In order to see beyond the focal point, to discern the process, the motion in context, we must liberate attention from its habitual *left* focus and let it expand to a surrounding *right* awareness, to see what only inattention can encompass.

In a pupil's first *AT* lesson,

I was trying to do something I had never done before—to get up consciously without effort...When I concentrated either on myself or on the goal I wanted to reach, something happened outside my field of attention to frustrate my attempt. It was only after I realized attention can be expanded as well as narrowed that I began to note progress. In order to move on a conscious level in which I could be aware of both doing and not-doing (of the inhibitory as well as the excitatory part of the movement), I had to expand my attention so that it took in something of myself and something of the environment as well. It was just as easy, I found, instead of setting up two fields—one for the self (introspection) and another for the environment (extrospection)—to establish a single integrated field in which both the environment and the self could be viewed simultaneously. (Jones, 1976:9)

The pupil's global awareness is reached through four awareness media: listening as well as looking, balancing as well as listening and looking, feeling as well as balancing, listening and looking. To look is to *left* focus. To listen is to lean into *right* beyond. To balance is to let *back* up. To feel is to relax into the *under* ground of *right* imagination and insight.

*AT* education works toward global awareness through a diffuse, sub-cortical kinesthetic experience of motor reorganization. Exercises for expanding actor awareness reach the same end by a method that, at first, seems opposite.<sup>5</sup>

## Stanislavski's Method To Expand Awareness

Stanislavski wonders whether the creative state can “be achieved bit by bit, by constructing the whole from its parts.” (cited in Benedetti, 1985:30) He decides to trust the actor's chance responses. He begins by concentrating attention on a single lamp in a dark room. (*AAP*:68-89) This engages the actor and initiates a distinction between external and internal attention. Then Stanislavski expands the scope of attention:

Step 1: Complete darkness in the room. A light appears on the table where the actors are sitting. “This little lamp is an example of the Nearest Object. We make use of it in moments of greatest concentration, when it is necessary to gather in our whole attention, to keep it from dissipating itself on distant things.”

Step 2: Repeat Step 1 in a well-lit room. Learn to focus attention on

objects with the same intensity as on the lamp in the dark room.

Step 3: Focus attention on items near, moderately near and farther off.

Step 4: Change from focus on *points* of light to focus within a *circle of attention*. First small, then medium, then large. Learn to see beyond sight, into sound.

Step 5: Shift focus from external attention of sight and sound to inner attention of balance and feeling. In bed at night, review the day in every possible detail. Recall a meal, the dishes on which it was served, your thoughts, your posture, your feelings.

Step 6: And finally, *allow* objects to trigger “an emotional reaction...to set in motion [one's] whole creative attention.”

(Stanislavski, *AAP*:71-84)

Stanislavski's exercise makes us aware of how we observe. He reconstructs environment by starting with one simple object. We are most attentive when we notice something specific, when our focus is narrow. Gradually, step by step, he expands attention's scope and depth, developing an increased ability to grasp the whole at each expanding step. Specific images, memories and movements are explored. Emotional reactions are encouraged. The actor places attention first on objects and events, then on ideas of objects and events, then on feelings aroused by ideas of objects and events. Each new facet of attention is rejoined through contextual analysis into a broadening, but unified, field of integrated awareness.

To the student it appears “not only difficult but impossible to be thinking at one and the same time about your role, technical methods, the audience, the words of your part, your cues, and several [internal and external] points of attention as well.” (Stanislavski, *AAP*:84)<sup>6</sup> The comprehensive development of whole attention required for successful performance takes “tremendous work, time, desire, and systematic practice.” (ibid:87)

Stanislavski emphasizes a practical understanding of the continuous relationship among *right* imagination, *back* action and *left* intelligence.

We cannot come through definite data to know the inner life of the person we are studying, and can only reach toward it by means of intuitive feeling. Here we are dealing with the most delicate type of concentration of attention, and with powers of observation that are subconscious [indirect, *right*-system] in their origin. Our ordinary type of [direct, *left*-system] attention is



not sufficiently far-reaching to carry out the process of penetrating another person's soul. (Stanislavski, *AAP*:88)

## Kinesthetic Attention

Tense, contracted muscles paralyze expression. The slightest tension interferes with “the delicate shadings of feeling and spirit” demanded by acting. To awaken the kinesthesia that gives *back* expression to *right* emotion, Stanislavski invokes a self observer to be aware of unnecessary contraction. He urges actors to develop a diffuse, surveying observation of their bodies through their daily life: going to bed, getting up, dining, walking, working, resting, “in moments of joy and sorrow.” (ibid:94) This observation is to become part of their physical/emotional make-up, their second nature

Kinesthesia is present at birth. It is pre-verbal *back* cerebellar. Our *back* self is silent, seen and sensed but not heard. It grows us, goes us to school. It doesn't complain when we hunch over our desks. But, in spite of being *background*, it shapes us constantly. An *AT* lesson lights “a little lamp” which invites attention to our vital, but routinely ignored, *back* self.

Actor training differs from *AT* education in its use of memetic imagery to access emotion and develop global attention, and in its emphasis on observation of the “direct personal intercourse with other human beings.” But “an actor, like an infant, must learn everything from the beginning, to look, to walk, to talk, and so on... We all know how to do these things in ordinary life. But unfortunately, the vast majority of us do them badly.” (ibid:96)

## Learning to Speak “From the Beginning”

Teachers use myths to transmit ideas. The *AT* myth is the actor who lost his voice and who then traces his loss to bad habits. Eventually this actor asks, “What is the critical moment that initiates my voice problem?” The actor experiments by observing himself in speech. An answer emerges. The critical moment is the moment of his intention to speak. Merely to think of speaking initiates the habitual response that constricts his voice. By continuous attention to the whole, the actor discovers that his intention to speak initiates a particular muscle tensing. Awareness of this muscle reaction creates an opportunity to bypass it.

This critical moment on the path from thought to speech resembles

Freud's moment of *preconscious* awareness on the path from unconscious memory to conscious thought (see Chapter 10). The moment is easy to miss. If we unconsciously fear saying, or even thinking, something, we can, in that critical preconscious moment, suppress it, and let our *left-serving* self become convinced that we never thought it.

Freud uses preconscious awareness to bypass psychic resistance. He guides his patient to not respond to unconscious fear by an habitual suppression that paralyzes speech. For Stanislavski, an actor's discipline is "to speak" within the critical moment in order to allow hidden thoughts and emotions to reach expression.

## Voice is a Core

There is a useful distinction between *right* voice and *left* speech.<sup>7</sup> *Right* voice exudes in the open feeling of vowel expressiveness, *left* speech in the closed articulation of the consonants that shape vowel feelings into bounded ideas. Voice is essential for mammalian survival. It is the core of humanity. Unlike reptiles who eat their off-spring, mammalian mothers, in the thalamo-substrates of their limbic systems, lust to nurture their noisy infants.

[When an infant cries, breasts flow.] With this crucial change [from reptile to mammal] in both motivation and vocalization, development shifts imperceptively toward the human form of prosodic (rhythmical and emotional) communication. (Levin, 1991:206)

A baby cries its need. Its formulations of reality develop from how that need is met. Does this vocal communication account for the phenomenal growth of the human brain from hominoid to man? (Tobias, 1982:50-64)<sup>8</sup> Lifelong habits are born in the interaction between baby and parent.

Vocal communication is proprio-cerebellar as well as cortical—*back* physical and *right* emotional as well as *left* ideational. The muscles that produce sound are as sensitively controlled as the muscles that focus eyes. (Basmajian, 1985:12) Speaking is as essential for survival as seeing and hearing. Emotional states emanate in voice tone. Integrated respiratory/vocal use leads to well being.

## Imagined Ah

*Vocalization requires: breath, vocal reeds, resonators and...a correct mental attitude.*

*Breathing depends upon the standard of general co-ordinated use.*

BUT

*‘Teaching a person to breath’, or ‘giving lessons in breathing or deep-breathing’...induces [unconscious] projections of all the established incorrect guiding orders associated with imperfect or inadequate breathing processes.*

Alexander

An actor sought to free his voice. In the experience of Ah he found a dynamic core of self formation. In AT education, the “whispered Ah” is an exercise to enable students to engage in vocalization yet interrupt their habitual patterns of sound production and breath control. The Ah exercise fosters “the most favorable opportunity for freeing” vocal process, including the “action of the vocal reeds, soft palate, cheeks, tongue [and] opening the mouth.” (Alexander, 1906:44) Whispering when forced, however, can itself cause voice damage. So it may be sometimes best only to imagine saying Ah.

Imagined Ah helps release the jaw and so ensures a good opening of the mouth and pharynx—both necessary for adequate resonance. (Dale, 1994; Dennis, 1988; Dennis, 1988; McCallion 1988:26; Macdonald, 1994) Releasing jaw releases tongue. This prepares for articulation. Imagined Ah “brings the breath into use in such a way that both inspiration and expiration are...performed [by] using the musculature” more efficiently. (McCallion, op. cit.) Releasing voice and breathing muscles initiates an integrative process, a deep soul-satisfying sigh that has a salutary effect on the whole person.

Imagined Ah brings the parts of vocal use together: attitude; AT directions for postural balance; jaw, tongue and facial muscle release; free mouth and pharynx opening; freely allowed respiration.

The use of Ah is widespread. “Italian singing masters...place Ah centrally in their vocal pedagogy.” (Vennard, 1967:112) Ah is ubiquitous in meditation and religious chanting: Judeo-Christian “A[h]men” and “A[h]llelujah,” Islamic “A[h]llah,” Buddhist “Na[h]m Myo Ho Renge Kyo,” Tibetan “A[h]um mA[h]ni pA[h]dA[h]me [A]hum” and Hindu “[Ah]ohm.” Participation in the Ah praxis is universal. Everyone uses mAh, pAh and Ah *ha!*

Do you realize that an inner feeling is released through the clear sound of the A[h]? That sound is bound up with certain deep inner experiences which seek release and easily float out from the recesses of one's bosom. (Stanislavski, *BAC*:88)

## *IMAGINED AH*

### Directions Projected Throughout

*Allow neck to be free, to let the head go forward and up, to let the back to lengthen and widen, ribs free, hips free, jaw and mouth free.*

### Step-By-Step Process

#### *1. Smile*

gently with eyes, upper lip slightly raised.

#### *2. Allow Tongue to be Free.*

Allow lower surface of tip of tongue to rest on top of lower teeth.

#### *3. Open Mouth*

by dropping the jaw, sliding it slightly forward, moving lower molars away from upper.

#### *4. Exhale, Imagine Saying Ah*

using the air available. It need not be a long Ah.

Exhale as long as comfortable.

#### *5. Close Mouth,*

gently bring jaw and lips together.

Leave back of throat, nasal passages and pharynx open.

#### *6. Allow Air to Re-enter Naturally*

through the nose.

Release abdominal and rib muscles.

Do not force a breath.

1. “Smiling gently with the eyes” encourages supple attitude to extend into supple motor activity involving eyes.

The benefits of smiling are ancient wisdom. Even a slight inner smile releases the soft palate muscles. 18th and 19th century Italian

Opera singing masters discovered an inseparable bond between attitude, body tension and expressiveness. (Garcia, 1847)<sup>9</sup> These voice teachers observed the reciprocal relationship between facial and throat muscles and the subtle reciprocity between a singer's feeling state and how a listener experiences the veracity of a singer's emotion. "The different qualities in the expression of the voice are dependent on, indeed inseparable from, the changes of the features; the intensity and truth of effect are determined by the [singer's] natural expression." (Shakespeare II, 1898:42) By learning to allow a "natural expression" of inner amusement, "the student [of singing] will have realized the importance of the freedom of the upper lip, of the smiling muscles and of the eyes...the highest test of the freedom of the face, tongue and throat [is] the smile." (ibid:43) The special technique of knowing how to not interfere with a simple spontaneous smile induces rich subconscious pleasure.<sup>10</sup>

2. *Allow tongue to be free.* We tense our tongues at the hyoid root. Excessive tension constricts voice. Resting the lower surface of tongue tip on top of lower teeth helps to free tongue.

Elusive aspects of the "indivisible unity of the human organism" (Alexander) become accessible by exploring minuscule body process changes. Tongue tensing, as well as "looseness about the neck," "fior di labbra" (sensitive expression of the lips), jaw freedom, mobility of the eyes are subtle but palpable and malleable signs linked to successful expressiveness. (Shakespeare II, 1898.:22-24) These are among the "certain elements" which are "subject to consciousness and will" and "capable in turn of acting on psychic processes that are involuntary." (Stanislavski)

3. *"Open mouth"* by dropping the jaw prevents neck hyperextension. It averts opening our mouth by tilting our head back. It also averts jamming our jaw back into our neck.

4. *"Exhale, imagine saying Ah"* bypasses habitual vocal use. "On mentally prolonging [Ah], the throat and tongue assume instantaneously the appropriate position. On whispering [Ah]...the same freedom may be observed, although there are some individuals who *whisper* rigidly...the instant the throat changes from its natural position we shall become conscious of a certain rigidity, which we must learn to avoid." (Shakespeare II:44)

Ah opens throat, fosters resting length of mouth and throat muscles. Imagining the guiding directions ("neck free...") fosters optimal respi-

ration. Freeing jaw and throat muscles fosters balanced posture.

5. “Close mouth” without constricting the throat ends the exhale cycle with breathing muscles rather than throat muscles.

6. *Allow air to re-enter naturally.* Respiration is both autonomic and voluntary. Allowing and observing inspiration without actively taking a breath, stimulates an integration of respiratory and postural process.

*[T]he artist produces on us only the emotions...which he feels himself.*

Manuel Garcia, 1847

## Remembering Brando’s 1947 Whispered Ah On Broadway in “Streetcar”

“Stellaaahhh”

The “method” brought to life  
Stellaaaaaaahhhhhh...” free,  
on and on and up and up,  
forever.

That irresistible animal longing for  
his mate absorbed, thrilled, released,  
was reborn in the throats of the audience.

The “St” in Stella started explosively  
from a taken stand,  
staccato.

But then it widened into a  
long expanding “Ah” which  
went on and on forever  
an antidote to all deaths  
inflicted by restraint.

Is death an invention of civilization?

Is death the ultimate discontent?

“Do not go gentle into that dark night  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light”

(Ben’s AT Journal, 2/8/93)