

Ready

The Self Observation Process That Leads To Discovery

Stanislavski saw voice as part of a total physical characterization in which the body responds organically to *right* intuitive inner impulses that facilitate *back* expression of emotion. (Benedetti, 1988:144)

During the period of searching I accidentally noticed that whenever I was trying to bring the sounds forward into my facial mask I tipped my head forward and dropped my chin. This position facilitated the emission of the sound as far forward as possible. Many singers recognize this method and approve of it.¹ (Stanislavski, *BAC*:100)

Bringing sound forward enables actors to “let the sounds sing for themselves,” to allow “the minutest details, modulations, shadings of...creativity” to find expression. (ibid:93, 94) The actor tips his head forward, explores vocal timbres and distinguishes between throat, nose, head, chest, occipital and laryngeal voices. (ibid:96) When he places his voice “in the [facial] mask where the hard palate, nasal cavities...and other chambers of resonance are situated,” his voice acquires a “ring and a power.” (ibid)

The actor finds that vocal “shortcomings” are surmounted by “getting rid of pressures, tensions, forcing, wrong breathing and [wrong] articulation.” (Stanislavski, *BAC*:95) At first he develops “a whole new series of exercises.” But then he discovers “the secret...turned out to be very simple”—becoming able to “remove a small, scarcely perceptible [throat] tension” enables his voice to “come out and be...more powerful.” (ibid:99) He cites singers who speak as if expression springs from unreachable sources: “it arrives”, “it comes” and, when not desirable, “it’s gone.” Forcing does violence, not only to sound, pronunciation and diction, but also to the actor’s emotional experience. (ibid:95)

Learning to allow instead of forcing frees expression—but takes discipline. To accommodate his neighbors, Stanislavski practices silently with acts of imagination. Lying supine, “stretched...out on a divan,” he simulates vocalizing with his mouth closed.

After the interval of a whole year...what was my astonishment when suddenly, most unexpectedly, out of my nose and mouth there floated a long-since matured tone, one I had never known before yet had always dreamed of. (Stanislavski, *BAC*:100)

He notices that “before I did these systematic exercises...I would get hoarse...now, by contrast [forward head tilting and unconscious-tension removal has] a beneficial, cleansing effect on my throat.” (ibid) He wonders whether this vocal freedom has come about merely by tilting his head forward and directing sound into the mask.

Control that Leads to Spontaneity

Alexander’s vocal experiments uncovered a balanced relation of head, neck and torso that facilitates not only vocal expression, but the integration of whole-body coordination. He speculates that it was unconscious, habitual neck tensing that choked his voice.

I saw that as soon as I started to recite, I tended to pull back the head, depress the larynx and suck in breath through the mouth in such a way as to produce a gasping sound. (Alexander, *UOS*:9)

Discovering his unconscious speaking habits confirms a suspicion that there might be some connection between postural habits and voice loss. He finds that when he tips his head forward and drops his chin—undoing his extraneous neck tensing—his voice is freed. He finds that releasing posterior neck muscles facilitates an integrative condition of balance throughout his body. Allowing head balance is the key. Alexander characterizes this use of head in relation to neck—in relation to body—as “the primary control of the workings of all the mechanisms of the human organism.” (1932, *UOS*:11)²

A freely allowed, efficient use of head and neck leads to an optimal use of self as a whole—providing the best conditions to improve the functioning of postural and respiratory systems. Anticipatory neck tensing, though habitual and unconscious, is voluntary and thus can be perceived and consciously controlled. (Alexander, *UCL*:134-156, 249-257) But the process is paradoxical. Control is by indirection. The essential task is,

learning, first, how to prevent...[moment to] moment, [interfering] with...the total pattern. (Alexander, *UOS*:150)

Control implies direct management. But too simple an interpretation misleads. To speak, to stand or to take a step is too complex an activity to micro-manage each individual part directly. We can, however,

prevent wrong by not doing, by not initiating the habitual tensing that interferes with innate coordination. We control breathing, posture and expression not by direct manipulation of the many particulars involved in these complex neuro-muscular acts, but by acknowledging and accounting for habits that interfere. In not doing an habitual response, we allow a more energetic and efficient integration of emotion, kinesthesia, action and attitude.

In great music and theater, the performance takes over the performer. Even as she sang, Billie Holliday released new expression. She learned to not interfere with her innate ability as she spontaneously selected and shaped sounds from her repertoire. She let herself discover each next note without preconception, allowing the new texture, sonority and loudness to match what she was feeling in the moment. It is this spirit of surprise and vitality that made her singing so fascinating and renewing.

Although intelligent management of complex situations requires *left* cortical participation, whole rationality—that engenders an adaptive, spontaneous control—is a triologue of *right*, *back* and *left*.

Nature [has] built the apparatus of rationality [*ego*] not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation [*id* and *AT*], but also from it and with it. (Damasio, *ibid*:128)

Emotion Learning Parallels Motor Learning

Simple Innate Emotions

Simple innate emotions, like simple motor reflexes, are triggered automatically. We can neither consciously initiate nor avoid them. They have three components—alpha, beta, gamma.³

alpha (α)—a predisposition

Alpha (α) emotion is a feeling evoked for the first time. We are born “wired” by limbic circuitry to detect a sudden noise (sound), bigger animals (size), slithers (motion) and a baby (progeny). There is no memory that causes alpha. It is an automatic, innate predisposition analogous to the foot detection triggered when our foot touches the ground. No *left* recognition or assessment either precipitates or prevents this simple response.

beta (β)—a bodily reaction

Simple alpha (α) emotion triggers neuro-chemical reactions that eventually manifest as tensing, sweating, salivating, adrenaline release, running, writhing, hiding, sexual arousal, nursing. These neuro-chemical reactions are the beta (β) part of the automatic emotion.

gamma (γ)—a sensory experience

When a sudden noise causes a bodily response, it gets our complete attention. It arouses a “startle” (the state of fear that features sudden neck tensing). This bodily response represents danger and “alters cognitive processing in a manner that fits the state of fear.” (Damasio, 1994:131) This experience of fear is an example of the gamma (γ) aspect of our automatic reactions. Gamma sensations, and the interpretations that flow from them, are not made by an aware *left-ego* self, but by a *right* flash of insight into a *back* bodily change. We feel unconsciously whether a situation is favorable for action before knowing or deciding on an act.

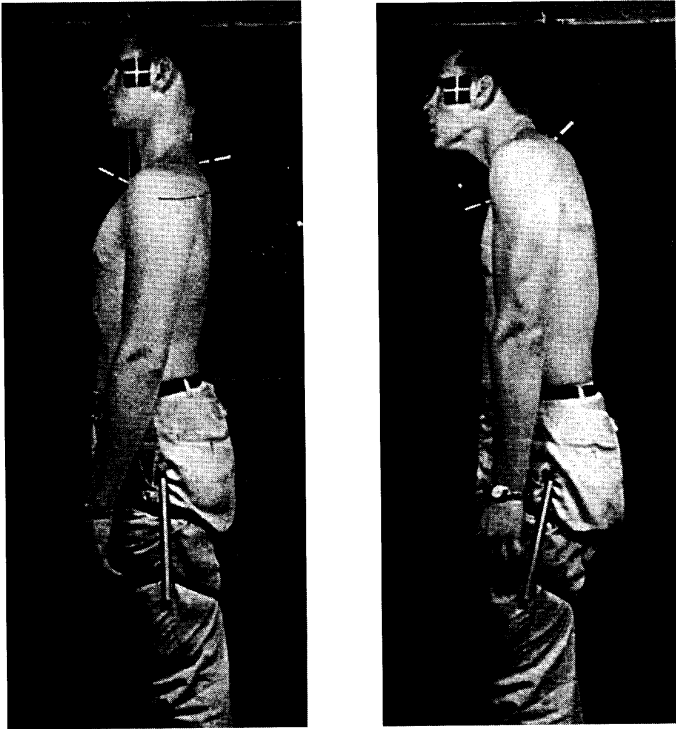


Figure 8-1

Body Response of Fear

In a lab experiment, subject responds to noise of a door slamming (right).
 Reprinted from *Body Awareness in Action*, by Frank Pierce Jones (1976)
 Courtesy of Alexander Technique Archives, Inc.

Acquired Emotions: Habits Linked to Specific Action

Complex acquired emotions, learned through our unique experiences, also have delta and epsilon components.

delta (δ)—a learned manifestation

Alpha (α), beta (β) and gamma (γ) emotions are like the motor reflexes that govern our standing and walking. As we experience these simple emotions, we link patterns of body response—heart rate, skin conductance, brain chemistry, hormones, muscle tone—with specific feelings. Once we experience responding bodily, we have a memory, a neuro replication, which can itself trigger the response. After hearing a noise that startles, a thought or event can remind us to anticipate hearing it again. We draw on our reservoir of body experience. We cringe at an *idea* of noise as we would to an actual noise. This is a learned delta (δ) response. It is analogous, in preempting innate contact reflexes, to learning to stiffen our leg automatically before our foot hits the ground. We respond to a present expectation by associating it to a past experience. We manifest the expectation bodily as we had in the past—and have similar feelings.

Simple emotions are linked to external events. Complex acquired processes, however, can engender ranges of emotional response without direct links to external stimuli. We evolve a set of idiosyncratic associations that determine what categories of experience warrant what categories of response.

epsilon (ϵ)—our inner dialogue

Ongoing alpha, beta, gamma and delta responses generate a semi-conscious inner dialogue about our ongoing emotional responses. This inner dialogue is our associations to regularly occurring gamma sensations and delta manifestations. Epsilon is our emerging assessment of how we are feeling.

Expectation and Habitual Response

Initially, we determine our reality through information we get from our bodies. However, specific situations engender expectations that alter the pattern of our sensory experience. By inferring a future, by expecting to feel a certain way, even subconsciously, we self-trigger our own reactions.⁴

Learned habits of response acquire associated feeling. By becoming habitual, expectation becomes an independent force which structures the acquisition of future experience.

A simple emotion or a simple motor reflex is an innate, automatic

response to an environmental event. It is spontaneous, never voluntary or preconceived.

Acquired emotional and motor responses are, on the other hand, learned. They are our re-creations of innate responses. They shape our identity from childhood. Although we retain little consciousness of them, they are vital. They connect us to our deepest, innate emotions. But the connections elude us. Over time, we have lost the capacity to distinguish between those moments when we are responding to the world, as opposed to those moments when we are projecting onto the world our own internal expectations. This blurring develops as our acquired emotional and motor responses become our habitual modes of behavior.

Becoming aware of habitual, acquired, motor and emotional responses enables choice—to tense or not, to run or not, to attack or not, to hide or not. As we begin to sense how acquired expectations color our experiences, we can free emotions to resonate more empathically with external events. And we can free our bodies from needless, counter productive tensing.

Not-Doing

When we let our muscles be themselves, they know what to do. But there is a decisive difference between a passive doing nothing and an active not doing. Becoming aware of incipient neck tensing in a startle and then not doing it, expands adaptability, generates unplanned receptivity. Not doing is not a suppression, nor a deadening of response, but an act of inhibition in which “the excitation continues and increases and non-habitual reactions take place.” (Peirce, EP:348) Acting—by not reacting habitually—is a new kind of action that facilitates integration of innate process with voluntary action and stimulates personal growth.

Unnecessary contractions are initiated when we are unsure.⁵ Trying to catch a ball in anticipation of its arrival ensures dropping it. Not trying to catch, but instead, allowing the ball to come to us, enables a successful reflex catch as the ball hits our hands.

An Inner Triologue

Ben found surprising expressiveness in the journal entries he made after each lesson. He attributes a mathematical insight to his *AT* lessons. (Wright, 1993)⁶ He began *AT* lessons with a self-defining pull-down, as though punched in the solar plexus.⁷ During lessons, however, he allowed himself to come up to an upright balance. He remarked on the

comfort this produced. But outside the lesson his habitual pull-down persisted. As lessons continued, Ben's pull-down released and his voice relaxed. Instead of an habitual, constricted high throat voice, Ben found a deeper, more resonate abdomen, chest, head and butt voice. Ben worked with the whispered and the imagined ah and played with song and speech during the twenty minute drive to and from his lessons. He developed a sing-song, free-association word-play, conducting his own vocal experiments to expedite *right* to *left* communication. He externalized *right* primary process through whistling, humming and singing spontaneous rhymes.

Epiphany on Thursday 10/7/93

Driving home, singing a song
 notice a *block in the rhyme*
 return again and again
 to the *block*—in a *sock*
 smack the *clock*—
 The clock is stopped!
 When did the clock stop
 When? When?

I am screaming, angry, desperate.
 I know when the clock stopped.
 It stopped on August 6, 1936.
 I am standing in the driveway
 waiting for my father to return.
 But I know he never will because
 he died on the operating table.

As long as I stand there,
 stop the clock, as he drives
 away in his car—he *never dies*.
 I keep him alive by keeping the clock
 stopped.

But how much of me, then, is locked
 up, stopped up in that stopped clock,
 that father-preserving stopped clock?
 What, in me, has never moved beyond
 that August 6, 1936
 when I was ten?

I wept as I drove. I wanted to show him.
 I could be good enough to suit him.

I wanted to play dominoes, monopoly
 well enough so that he would not get
 put out with me and quit
 in disgust with me.

But he won't let me—so I wait
 in the driveway, forever,
 for him to return
 to set things straight.

(Ben's *AT* Journal, 10/11/93)

Sensorimotor *back*-system experience contributes decisively to early memory and serves “as the basis for the first self-related experience, what might be called the core sense of self.” (Levin, 1994:191) This suggests how *AT* lessons contributed to Ben's self-revelation. Early memory forms “a coordinating influence within the brain” which is “an important step in the establishment of early physical self-cohesiveness.” (ibid) Ben's pull-down is his expression of “the *stopped clock*.” He describes “an earlier clock stop,” in April 1928:

Just when my brother was born
 I lost the orange engine (favorite toy)
 as I looked out over the garage to see
 where his new nursery would be.
 My brother was being born
 and I was abandoned
 to a nurse—nice enough
 but NOT, nor ever more
 my own true mother

(Ben's *AT* Journal, 10/11/93)

AT lessons inspire a reorganization of balance and locomotion which challenges habitual internal self stability. *AT* education can stimulate a deep memory of an original core experience in which intense emotions found expression in body tensing.⁸ Ben's habitual clutching is an embodiment of his emotions. It is a pattern individual to him. Habitual subconscious perpetuation of this emotion-related body tension maintains habitual background emotional states.⁹ The gradual unraveling of habitual use during *AT* lessons generate motor level conditions which bypass the self-cohesiveness that binds emotion and resists change.

While motor release may arouse memory, *AT* does not attempt to explicate or psychoanalyze memory.¹⁰ In an *AT* lesson, it is the kinesthetic conversation which guides the pupil to bypass habit.

Chronology of Ben’s Epiphany

Ben’s habitual pull-down is a bodily expression of Ben’s feelings. But this bodily manifestation serves to keep the feeling and its origin out of conscious awareness. Ben’s epiphany, an example of the subjective dialogue (epsilon (ϵ) stage) that is the source of art, reveals how he has physicalized feelings regarding his father. When the thought is spoken out loud, he hears it anew. His feelings return even though the original experience that stirred them was years ago. Ben’s muscles releasing transforms into a new emotional experience.

Bending forward is the child’s unconscious imitation of the movement pattern of a parent with stomach ulcers. Bending forward also expresses grief, a ten year-old boy emotionally punched in the solar plexus by his father’s criticism and rejection, and by the realization that he will never be able to rectify things. The poem is a transparent process in which all elements are present and visible—feeling, embodiment and meaning.

Chronology of Ben’s Experience

A	Ben comes to the <i>AT</i> lesson with an habitual background posture (his habitual pull-down) and a story (C) that contains hidden feelings related to his father.
δ	<i>AT</i> lesson disrupts Ben’s habitual body tensing and posture.
ϵ	The disruption stirs Ben’s inner thoughts.
E	The stirring motivates Ben to spontaneous, free association word play after the lesson.
D	By expressing himself out loud, Ben notices a change in flow—a block in the rhyme—“something wrong.”
δ	Ben neither avoids the block nor explains it away. His body is no longer an accomplice in the habitual repression. Ben’s new body state allows information to come to him in a new way.
γ	As he plays with this information, allowing associations—“block,” “clock,” “smack,” “stop”—he deconstructs the concealing shell of buried feelings.
δ	This leads to a bodily expression—crying.
α	The bodily and emotional experience lead to a new synthesis (A).

‘Ready’ — A Position of Advantage

Bending forward in a quarter squat is an *AT* “position of mechanical advantage”—referred to as “monkey” by *AT* teachers. We call it “Ready.” Ready is a movement rather than a position, “a movement taking place inside the body and not in space.” (Binkley, Notes) The movement highlights the reciprocal relationship between flexor and extensor muscles—particularly of head, neck and trunk—that sustain balance. Ed worked with Ben moving in and out of Ready for months, trying to bypass Ben’s habit of over-contracting. Ed was quite unconcerned with any psychic origin. The result, nevertheless, was to stimulate reaction that deconstructed the bodily manifestation and revealed the emotion locked within Ben’s pull-down.

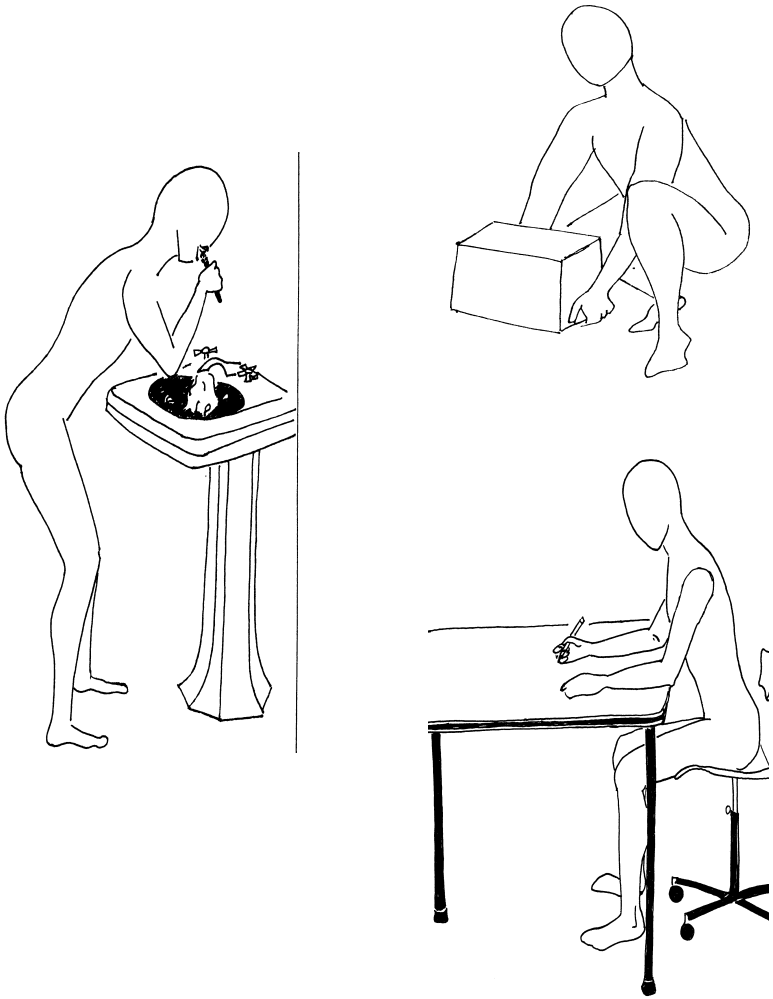
Ready is basic to all movement disciplines. Freeing neck, releasing head forward and up, lengthening and widening back, are the steps to achieving full back extension, to getting Ready.

Ready is a quarter squat that sustains a natural torso extension. Ready can also be a full squat similar to a football lineman’s stance. It entails a relaxed flexion of the hip, knee and ankle joints. A squat is basic. Natural examples of Ready are: receiving-position in racquet sports, batter’s stance, plié in dance, squat in power lifting, horstance in martial arts, golf stance. Ready is a fundamental building block in the grammar of movement.

During a lesson, Ready is guided. The movement entails direction of dynamic oppositions: opposition of head to neck, opposition of top of spine to bottom of spine, opposition of front muscles to back muscles, opposition of knee to hip, opposition of ankle to knee, opposition of arms to shoulder, opposition of hands to wrist, opposition of fingers to palm—sustained in dynamic interplay. It facilitates the pupil’s anti-gravity back extensors during forward bending at hip and knee.

A crucial moment occurs as we begin movement from standing into Ready. It is the moment of the unconscious rescue response—a posterior head tilt and neck tensing—manifesting the instinctive fear of falling. The rescue response may be triggered by ocular receptors or labyrinth otolith organs. It is usually accompanied by other interfering responses: torso flexion, hyper-extension, front-to-back or side-to-side hip rotation.

The aim of an *AT* lesson is to inhibit these habitual responses. The pupil learns to sustain the extensor support of the back while engaging in Ready. This brings about a vital awareness of the coordination between head, neck and hip. Learning to perform a movement as simple and basic as Ready without unnecessary tension, transfers to all activity—from sitting at a computer terminal, to playing tennis, to bowing a violin.



Examples of Ready

Drawings by Julie Paparella.

Figure 8-2

When Ready is in balance, I experience a wave of modest, but distinct, pleasure down the back, a pleasant chill, like goose bumps, emanating down legs up back to neck. It is a joy, a marvelous feeling. It stimulates a free flow of thought. This is not work but fun, thoughts pop out. It is self invigorating, self-perpetuating, refreshing. It produces more energy than it uses.

(Ben's AT Journal, 10/15/94)

Directions for Ready

(adapted from Dilys Carrington, 1985)

Free legs, bend them without stiffening or holding. Direct knees over toes. Release arms, let them hang toward the floor, extend shoulders out-and-down to the sides, without protraction or retraction.

Release ankles, knees and hip joints. Tightening the muscles that control these joints will hinder the freedom of movement.

To initiate the movement, free neck and allow head to tilt forward. This neck release facilitates the fullest possible length in the torso and enables the joints to move easily.

Free the muscles in front of the ankles, the muscles in the thighs from the knees to the crests of the pelvis, the muscles over the front of the hip joint, the muscles up the front of the body leading from the pubic bone to the front neck muscles (sternocleidomastoid) which insert just behind the ear.

To allow the knees to bend freely, lengthen in front of the ankles. To allow the torso to move freely, lengthen over the front of the hip-joints. The ankles release to allow the knees to go forward, the seat goes back to allow balance round the vertical line just in front of the ankles as well as to balance the head tilting forward.



Alexander Teaching Ready
Photo Courtesy of Deborah Caplan

Figure 8-3

Difficulties in Ready: Moving into Ready brings hip, knee and ankle flexors into play. When these flexors are engaged by guided movement, a pupil may over-respond by unnecessarily tensing neck muscles and upper torso trunk flexors—resulting in posterior head tilt, neck hyperextension and trunk flexion. Cervical flexion, upper torso flexion, torso hyper-extension, shoulder protraction or retraction reflexively disengage the reciprocal, supporting back extensors (Figure 8-4).¹¹ This has the undesirable consequence of shifting body support to back ligament and disc structures. Maintaining natural torso extension, on the other hand, disperses the stress on back and ligament structures—while bending forward from the hip joint (middle figure below.)

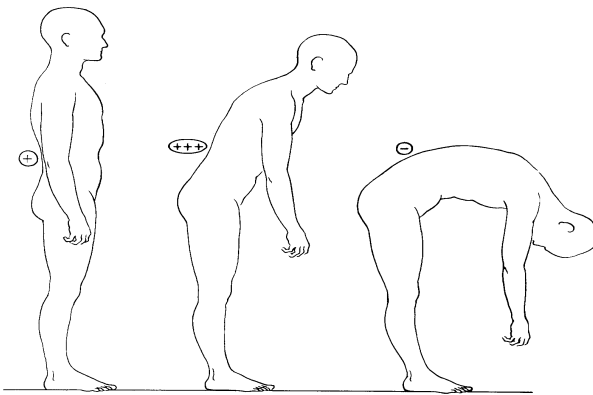


Figure 8-4

Bending Trunk Disconnects Back Support Muscles

Minimal activation of back extensors (left); with forward bend, back extensor activity increases to sustain torso length against gravity (middle); when front torso flexors are activated (right), back extensors reflexively disengage, putting back at risk. (Basmajian, 1985)

Exploring Other Ready Positions

The paleoanatomist Raymond Dart believed *AT* education “is important because it is based on the fundamental biological fact that the relation of the head to the neck is the primary relationship to be established in all proper positioning and movement of the body.” (Dart, 1959) Based on his *AT* lessons and his study of anatomy, Dart detailed procedures for moving from standing to a fetal crouch, supine to prone, lateral movements, rotational movements and crawling, pre-crawling, “quadrupedal and pentapedal stances (using head, elbows and knees for support). (Dart, 1946, 1947, 1950) *AT* teacher Alex Murray worked with Dart’s movement experiments to develop a reference system for teaching the attainment of skill and poise in movement (Figure 8-5). (Murray, 1988)

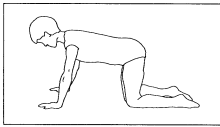
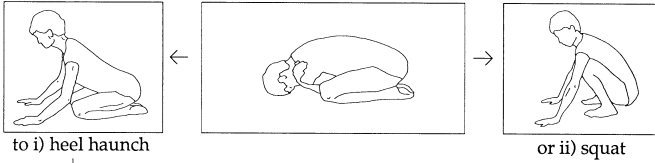
Dart Procedures

Drawing by Gretchen Sommers
From *Direction Magazine*, Murray, 1988

a: Movement from face down to fetal crouch.

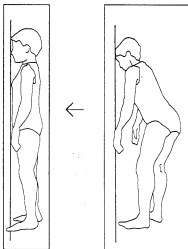
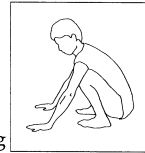


b: Crouch by movement of the tail over the feet



c: Creeping position from heel haunch

→ d: Squat from creeping



e: Clambering (squat with knuckles on chair)

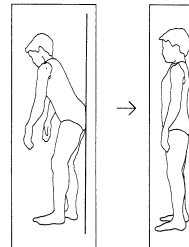
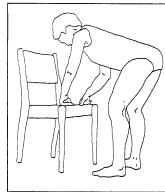


Figure 8-5

Making Trouble

To speak or not to speak
That is the question.

Whether it is better
to say out loud outrageous originalities
so new, so simple and so decisive
they dare the comfort of satisfied tradition,
rend the gentle fabric of self-assured complacency,
strew into tatters the many cloaks
of decency, tact, diplomacy?

Or just, to rest mute and muffled,
swallowing the unspoken,
unspeakable words,
harsh meal of indigestibles?
and shrink into an ancient, ruined ball of dust!
So that's my poem

Do I dare speak
and reveal my
ambition
arrogance
defiance of convention
refusal to accept
any status quo?

Do I dare make the trouble,
that I so long to do?
Why am I unable to live
without making trouble?
Why is making trouble all I am?

I hate my making trouble.
But I cannot live without it.

What does this have to do with *AT*?
With all that is
expressed in my standing/speaking habits,
my anticipatory preemptive activities,
my most bad habits?

Could I find these conflicts in my body?
Could I revise them to greater comfort and accomplishment?

(Ben's *AT* Journal, 4/5/93)

