

To Simply Move ... Simply

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

"When I was teaching my daughter Amelia how to snowboard, she caught her edge exactly twice and never did it again. When you catch the downhill edge of your snowboard, it slams you to the ground with such force you feel as if somebody just dropped a safe on you.

It hurts everywhere. After the first time you do it, you have to think consciously about tensing the muscles in your legs to keep your edge up as you ride. Then you get tired, lazy or distracted, you catch your edge again, and it practically knocks you out. Generally after that second experience, you have developed a deeply ingrained emotional bookmark. Then, whenever you start to relax those muscles, you get a really bad feeling, like somebody's going to drop a safe on you, and those muscles tighten right up. You never have to think about it again."

- *Laurence Gonzales*²

Although massage tends to be more prosaic than snowboarding, either as described by Laurence Gonzales or as depicted in the recent Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy, the underlying principles of balance, posture and coordination of complex movement patterns are drawn from the same well of human neuromuscular capabilities. In massage, ill-learned patterns of balance and movement do not slam you immediately into the snow, but they can reduce your effectiveness and, over time, cause you just as much pain. Much as a visual artist has to see through the symbolic meaning of a subject into the underlying patterns of shape, line and lighting, in teaching and learning massage, we need to, at times, remove consideration of techniques and session goals to experience and learn our much needed kinesthetic vocabulary.

To learn a kinesthetic skill, we first need a willingness to initially do it wrong. There is a process to neuromuscular learning that doesn't start out with perfect enactment. From a teaching perspective, the process begins with my defining and describing what I want to convey. Next comes showing the sequence

of movements, much as I would actually do them. After that, I show the sequence again, breaking it down into smaller "kinesthetic phrases" and adding in verbal comments. Now it's the students' turn to attempt the skill, observe the results of their initial actions, and attempt their first refinement. My continuing task as an instructor is not to fix something that is wrong, but to emphasize paths toward eliciting the desired sensations and movements. Time between classes offers a latency period necessary for the student's body-mind to assimilate and integrate the neuromuscular learning. In subsequent classes, we review and then extend. The process repeats throughout our lives and physical aspirations.

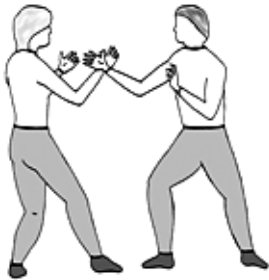


Figure 1 - Practicing stance and coordinated movement via Tai Ji "push hands." I

typically start one of my sports or deep-tissue classes by stepping back from massage techniques to visit several exercises in coordinated movement and interpersonal interaction. One of my favorites is based on the *Tai Ji* exercise of "push hands," with the stance and positions shown in **Figure 1**. In this and several similar exercises, both participants have to work together, both leading and following moment-by-moment, movement-by-movement. Neither can force the movement or the partner simply disengages, allowing the "forceful" (and generally off-balance) partner to contend with gravity on their own. Neither can mentally disengage into distraction, since their partner is close enough to remind them of their joint participation with a gentle tap on the cheek. Neither forcing nor disengagement is particularly an issue in massage class, although the issues symbolic in the movement can, and often do, reveal habitual patterns of facing the outside world. I'm going to postpone following that thought for a moment to stick with the exercise itself.

The exercise requires complex patterns of movement and body awareness, particularly when done quietly (out of the verbal mind) and slowly, so as to require moment-by-moment neuromuscular control. With the two participants engaged back-of-hand to back-of-hand, there is movement from the shoulders, yet the shoulders are, almost paradoxically, relaxed. Part of what is learned is localization of muscle activation and minimization of effort. At the same time, there is a larger movement of the body as a whole, shifting weight from the rear leg, through the pelvis, onto the forward leg, and back again. The arm and body movements are coordinated. The students/participants have the opportunity to notice how their feet make contact with the floor, how their weight shifts between legs, and how this weight transfer occurs through their posture

and core muscles of the trunk. They also have an opportunity to notice shifts in their breathing (or holding of breath) and in their emotional response. Ultimately, the exercise provides kinesthetic vocabulary (i.e., neuromuscular patterning) and tactile experience that will later be taken into work at the table; work in which the partner becomes client becomes partner in their own facilitation.

Return now to the interactions between how we move and how we encounter the world. Dance instructor and author Sally Sevey Fitt advances "four basic assumptions" that speak to this mirroring of movement and world.¹

- The human being operates as a functional whole: mind, body and emotions are not separate functions, but are integrated synergistically in human action and reaction.
- Each individual has a characteristic and unique pattern of movement behavior.
- There is a correlation between movement behavior and other modes of behavior such as personality, expression of emotions, patterns of cognitive information processing, and all aspects of behavior.
- It's possible to expand the range of an individual's characteristic use of time, space and force.

Fitt continues further, quoting Constance Schrader, "Information processing is no longer a one-way street with the mind controlling and the body responding. Input from the body is as central to thought, imagination and response as the brain. Human reception, processing and response link brain and body into a functional whole. Consequently, a change in any one component of human behavior affects the entire system." This, perhaps, particularly when we expand the concept of movement to include touch, is a key to why many find the process of learning massage to be transformative. Move well.

Schrader continues, "Each body is unique. Your ability to imitate another person's movements will be determined not just by your skill in reading movement, but also by the physical potential that you have developed by this time in your life. Likewise, your ability to create movement patterns will be determined by what you have either seen or tried in your lifetime."³

References

1. Fitt, Sally Sevey, 1996: *Dance Kinesiology*, 2nd ed. Schirmer Books, ISBN 0-028-64507-3.
2. Gonzales, Laurence. 2003: *Deep Survival - Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*. W. W. Norton, ISBN 0-393-05276-1, pp. 53-54.
3. Schrader, Constance A. 1996: *A Sense of Dance*. Human Kinetics, ISBN0-873-22476-0.

Click [here](#) for more information about Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB.



Page printed from:

http://www.massagetoday.com/archives/2006/04/09.html?no_b=true