Sun and Moon

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Birds ceased to fly, the wind ceased to blow and the temperature dropped; the planet appeared stilled in the non-ordinary. In the absence of primary light, secondary reflection illumined the body of the earth—casting light and shadow in such a way that when viewing people and landscape, the depth of field and color were more delineated than ever before. Stillness penetrated and permeated both earth and atmosphere. While looking out over the Valley of the Rhine two days ago, this is how I experienced the solar eclipse. Because of the immediacy of this past event in all our experience, I shall use the metaphor of sun and moon to illustrate my views and thinking about direction and inhibition in our work.

Recall for a moment your own personal experience of the eclipse, when for a brief period of time the reflective light of the moon gave the appearance of being primary, the true and primary light having been shadowed by the moon's passage between the sun and the earth. My personal experience of that passage, when secondary reflection gave the semblance of being primary, was how quickly all that was cast in the reflective light preempted what I remembered as being primary.

Similarly, when I consider my body (that is to say that aspect of myself which provides me with a sense of place, boundary and context from which to respond to all I am in relation to), I do not think of the physical me as my primary expression of self. More primary is the quality of my being, my awareness and my intention reflected in the expression of my body. To the untrained eye, however, whether it's my own or an observer's, the patterns of movement expressed in my body are far more tangible than the initial movement of energy, which originates in my awareness and my intention.

Now, let’s consider the body in relation to the solar eclipse. While the body is tangibly available for view to an observer, and kinesthetically available for sensing to the person embodied, less tangible is a person’s intention. Not unlike the moon reflecting light from the primary source, the body reflects the fact that I am up to something, but physical patterns of movement are not the cause of whatever I am up to. Which of the two, then,

the body's patterns or the attention patterns needs to be addressed to effect real and lasting change?

By way of analogy, during the solar eclipse when the sun could no longer be seen, did you believe for a moment that our primary source of light would not return? The reflective light of the moon was far more tangible given the moon’s preeminence. If you doubted that the sun's light would return, you might have been tempted to accept the conditions of light caused by the moon's passage between the sun and the earth as primary. Otherwise, you'd probably just allow the experience of the change in light, and would wait for things to return to the integrative state of the natural order of things.

Is there something we can learn from this solar eclipse? It might very well be the degree to which, in our thinking about habit and change, we are prey to similar paradoxical inferences of primary and secondary sources characteristic to the eclipse. In other words, when changing habitual patterns that manifest themselves physically, if our attention self is the primary source of interference, then our focus on changing the way we use our bodies, however tangibly apparent the habitual patterns appear, is secondary. When we give direction, to some extent are we not working with the reflection of the problem rather than with the true and primary source of the problem? If so, how then do we use the kinesthetic messages sent by the body in a constructive way and not delude ourselves into thinking that if we change the body, we'll rid ourselves of the problem that in itself governs the body's response. Essentially, which do we hold accountable—the reflection of our interference, or the primary source of interference?

Let me offer by way of example an incident from my recent experience that speaks to this conundrum.

As a boy, my home environment was not all that it might have been had my parents’ own childhood’s been different. Life at home was unpredictable, prone to emotional and physical violence. To avoid experiencing that which was unpleasant and threatening, and in order to protect myself from the overwhelming nature of a given experience, I distanced myself from my actual experience. This helped me manage the present, in anticipation of the future. Ask me about something “close to home” today, and I know quite well what I feel in reaction, but I don't have the same clarity of feeling or clarity of thinking about my actual experience.

Is something missing here?

A part of me is missing.

Unfortunately, this is the part that usually helps one to make decisions that enrich one’s life. However, when you only know what you think and feel in reaction, or more specifically what you think and feel having reacted to yourself having experiences, you miss valuable information about how life encounters have really affected you, and because of this, what really matters to you. You end up making decisions based upon

your attachment to a series of experiences you never knew you were avoiding, and which, as a result were partially lived.

This dilemma has become clearer to me than ever. During this past year my wife and I sold our home of 12 years in a neighborhood we truly loved, to buy a home in a neighboring town better suited to our children's education. When we placed a bid to purchase a new home, the circumstances around the sale required the purchaser—me—to know much more in that immediate moment what the experience of home was. However, historically, my favored reactive response was to make things work, even when clearly they did not. As previously suggested, this distances one from one's true feelings. So, distanced, and with my wife's blessings, and under great pressure from the Realtors I placed a bid on the house—fearing I would lose the purchase if I didn't act quickly. The bid was accepted; then, when I saw the house for the first time in the light of day, I regretted my decision, and was baffled and distraught as to how I could have made such a decision in the first place.

I was in despair. To console me, a friend offered an Irish saying: when you move into a new house, the first year you invite your enemies, the second your friends, and the third you move in. I took this to heart but was hardly consoled The Realtor who sold us the house was exasperated over my angst. She claimed that I knew nothing was wrong with the house. "A house is," she said, "after all just a house." She said I was upset about the circumstances in which I had to make the decision: having viewed the house at night and being under pressure to find the right house for my family.

In fact, I was more upset about the process by which I had made my decision. In hindsight, at the moment I placed the bid to buy the home I wasn't present in my feelings, except in reaction to my past. I had learned, as a boy, rather than to live through what I actually felt, to distance myself from the actual experience I was in the process of experiencing. Unconsciously, I taught myself how to avoid feelings and thoughts which were associated with unpleasant experiences in order to manage situations and make them work. I favored reactive responses which circumvented the actual experience first presented.

Alexander suggested his method would preclude a person from having to make good what was entered into wrongly. In using his method of learning, a person could reason the better way before the wrong way was taken. I have no doubt that the inhibitive thought and the inhibitive emotional response do provide a space between the stimulus and response necessary to reason the better way. However, I am not entirely convinced that any method of reasoning which places at the helm the very part of me that keeps the other missing, can ever make the appropriate selection of the information necessary to right the wrong. I am more interested than ever, after this house episode, in knowing when I am allowing myself to experience the actual experience I am experiencing, and when I am reacting to myself having an experience.

In other words, at what step along my path of awareness do I inhibit? Moreover, who is doing the inhibiting, the part of me who is missing, or the part of me who, although more

present, is nonetheless, present in reaction.? First, I offer a tale which will hopefully shed light on this dilemma, and second, we will explore this issue in practical ways: as teachers in the traditional sense we will inhibit and give direction, through using our hands and verbal instruction, to dissuade our student from reinforcing habitual patterns of reactive behavior: then secondly (somewhat untraditional), we will encourage our student to allow their awareness to expand to include not just what they experience but to take in as well that moment when they distance themselves from the immediacy of the experience, and move towards reaction. At that moment the teacher through using his/her hands and verbal instruction continues to provide the integrative support of primary control, however, without guiding the student away from the direct nature of their experience. In this manner, one is asked to reorganize one's awareness but not to reorganize the body. Since intention is the organizing principle around which the body organizes itself, one has been encouraged to inhibit reaction, but to let direction co-ordinate around one's clarity of intention.

Believe me, they are two different worlds In the former, the teacher works with his/her student as if the primary source of interference resides in the student's body. The teacher subsequently directs the student's attention to the habitual patterns in the body, attempting to make the changes in that context. In the latter, the teacher sees the body as a reflection of interference and works more directly with the student's attention self as the primary source of interference.

Let me offer a tale which illustrates both approaches. To witness what I shall describe, imagine that we are in Switzerland, in May of 1997. Suspend time for a moment. Watch with me as I arrive by car at the retreat where I will lead a workshop for Swiss teachers. During the next five days, we will live together, work together, take meals together, and walk in the hills together, while studying the principles of Alexander's teaching.

There is an incredibly soft, mostly misty rain. The hills surrounding the inn are covered with wine vineyards and dotted with small, Swiss-designed homes. In front of the inn there is a freshly plowed field, in the midst of which there is a farmer, and two young boys about the ages of nine or ten, who I make out to be his sons. The two boys are standing apart from each other, watching silently as their father, who kneels on one knee, and holds his arm at shoulder height, stretched out—poised. I wonder what exactly is he doing? Then as he continues his movement, I see what he is up to.

Between his thumb and index finger he holds a seed. Kneeling he lets loose the seed to drop from shoulder height, to the earth. The farmer repeats this process with three seeds, each time letting loose of the seed, allowing it to fall and find its place in the soil. The farmer is strong in his appearance, yet his fingers pull apart from holding the seed gently, albeit with great certainty. The boys watch. The farmer, still kneeling, scratches some dirt around the seeds, rises, then he and his sons walk away from the field. Maya, the driver of my car pulls to a stop at the side of the inn. The spell is broken.

With no interpretation, I step from the car, having taken in this tableau of the hills surrounding me, the homes scattered about the vineyards and the misty rain I can barely

see, and now feel. My experience is impressionistic, a mutual interchange of information and impression of which I am a part. I attach no meaning to this unusual way of planting seeds. I am simply in the experience of what I see.

The next day, the Swiss teachers are interested in, among other things, the value of Alexander's directions, given in context with his concept of inhibition. Alexander, himself argued both ways. He was for them because the instructions to free the neck, etc., provided the necessary means whereby in that space between habitual stimulus to a given response, habit might give way to more neutral conditions associated with primary control. On the other hand, he bemoaned ever coming up with the directions because he never felt people knew how to give them without doing them.

Personally, I believe, like Frank Jones that, while directions do help to supplant personal identification with habitual patterns, nonetheless, the conscious giving of the instructions often substitute for the real learning that comes from simply meeting yourself at that moment of inhibition. What lasting value is there in changing patterns by avoiding patterns, without seeing yourself being yourself? Once you give directions, rather than consciously experiencing yourself being yourself at the moment of interference, which is who you really are in that moment, you run the risk of turning yourself into someone you're not for the sake of good use. My response to the Swiss teachers went something along these lines. However, to my mind, I still didn't give a satisfactory answer.

We break for lunch. Then after lunch, we have three hours to process our morning, to do whatever comes to mind. Like most, I take a solitary walk in the hills. This day, unlike the previous one is bright and sunny, no rain. Springlike, all newly alive. After my hike, walking back towards the inn, I come upon the field that had, on the previous day, belonged to the farmer and his two sons. Today the field is empty. There is no misty, enchanting rain, just the field, freshly tilled, fertile. Without the rain and without the farmer and his sons there is only the field to view, a broad and fertile expanse of earth.

In that moment the meaning and place of directions becomes clear to me. This field I thought at the time, had to have been tilled before he planted his seeds. I realize that the farmer had only planted his three seeds in the manner he had done because he trusted that the field was fertile. There was no question, no doubt as to whether or not the seeds would take hold in the soil. The field was fertile. His raising his arm, poised to plant one seed, simply allowing it to fall into a random place was, to my mind his way of acknowledging the relationship between soil and seed. And for me, between inhibition and directions. His dropping the seed was more of an offering in celebration of the way he had come to view things in his life. His sons had come to watch. They, like he, had come to celebrate the mystery they depended upon. Perhaps? Who knows? It is what I took from the experience because of the questions the Swiss teachers had posed. Today, as the field stands empty in the sunlight the impressions of the previous day have meaning because of the Swiss teachers' questions.

Why had I not experienced this interpretive view before? I believe it was because I was captivated by the dropping of the seeds. The farmer, moreover in his arresting, stilled

poise, was filled with such certainty and grace that he completely captivated my attention. My entire impression was that of the farmer planting and his sons who observed. I took for granted the fertility of the soil. However, at some point previously, the farmer certainly must have plowed the earth, for that must be done in preparation for planting. Sounds simple, but let's look at this for a moment in terms of direction and inhibition. Lets say that the seeds are Alexander's directions, the planting of which he wishes to take root, to grow apart from the habitual seeds which seed themselves, moment by moment in habitual response. Now, where are we in this analogy of — soil and seed? Certainly, we are not the directions. Rather, we are the soil, either barren without the space to receive that which is new, different and unknown, or fertile, without attachment to the habit of identity.

First and foremost, our bodies provide us with our experience of ourselves. The nature of the integrity of our design is that we are designed to function without our having to do much about it. We do not have to work at being us to make us work, especially since we are designed to function even apart from our desires. Essentially, with so many seeds blowing in the wind, we don't really have to select which seeds we feel are right to plant (certainly not if the soil is prepared, sifted clean from interference) Similarly, from an Alexander point of view, we don’t need to determine which directions need to be selected and given at a specific moment. There are no receptors in our makeup designed to tell us when things are right; rather the receptors let us know when we interfere.

Astonishingly, when all is working right, and this is important, we tend to feel little apart from the experience we are having. When we are working right, we have the luxury of being more directly involved in the experience at hand with no reaction to it. I repeat, when all is working in the manner in which we are designed to function, we are more available for the experience, free from preconceived notions, and less inclined to retreat into reaction—which is to manage the experience. One either informs the experience, thus fitting all information into one's own paradigm or else one allows the experience to inform oneself.

Since our design is self contained, and without the need of our personal assistance, this raises an interesting question: what's in it for us? What's left when we are not in reaction? We are, of course, not the we who we are constantly grooming, but rather the we who allow our experience to inform us anew over and over of who we might potentially be. Yet this, as we know, is not the way it usually happens. Seldom do we allow ourselves to experience directly what we are engaged in experiencing.

Almost immediately, we move away from the direct nature of the experience and into managing that experience, making certain it fits into our paradigm. Rather than allowing the experience to inform us, we inform the experience. This is reaction. It is usually the field onto which we toss our seeds.

Is not our task, however, simply to prepare the soil of ourselves first, before we plant the seeds: to inhibit reinforcing old patterns of reactive behavior and perception, allowing new information to flood our senses apart from the information we feel we must have in

order to respond? For many, directions are the manner of preparing the soil. But the priorities appear to be wrongly placed. If Alexander truly meant that his Technique was only doing what nature was already doing anyway, of what real value is this constant attention to directions? This presupposes that the experience you are having is ill suited, ill placed, and not worth it. It is what it is, however faulty one's sensory impression.

How, then do we prepare our soil except that we inhibit continuing to react, reinforcing our same perceptions? What if, indeed the soil were simply our experience of things; just simply us experiencing something. My way of preparing my own soil to receive this analogy of the soil and seed the day following the original series of impressions was to allow myself simply to take in information apart from what I customarily see, and not try to fit it in anywhere. This led me to experience more directly the experience I was actually having, moved merely by the impression of it all. What if I had been so inclined at that critical moment "close to home"? Drawn by the direct nature of the experience, might I have met myself being myself at my weakest moment, and backed off from the decision to buy the house? And, which of the two—the body's patterns or the attention patterns — needed to be addressed to affect my awareness and insight sufficiently to make a choice apart from reaction? I'm not certain. I still believe that my learned and patterned behavior in that instance was so deeply ingrained that today I can only live with myself having made the decision, awaiting the opportunity to make a better one.

Remember, when changing habitual patterns that manifest physically, and yet occur attentionally, if our attentional self is the primary source of interference then our focus on changing the way we use our body is secondary. When we give direction, might we not be working with the reflection of the problem instead of with the primary source of the problem? If so, which do we hold in accountable—the reflection of our interference, or the primary source of interference? I simply offer this question as territory to explore.

Historically, our approaches to making changes when learning the Alexander Technique are based on kinesthetic recognition of habitual patterns. However, because kinesthetic recognition necessarily involves bodily sensations, we often reflect inward, drawing away from active participation in what we are up to and we behave in effect as if what patterns we perceive kinesthetically are primary when in fact they are really more of a reflection of the quality of our attention and awareness. My daughter once said to me, "If you want me to change, change my mind, not my body."

What I'd like to explore with you now are patterns of interference given a person's involvement in an activity. Let's see what happens when you make changes in the primary source, (i.e., attentional recognition) versus making changes in what is reflected in the body (i.e. kinesthetic recognition), and how working with the primary source of interference will likely guide you through the experience you usually avoid, thereby informing you of what you actually think and feel. The retreat into reaction is obviated because, indirectly, you've inhibited through direct experience.

This concludes the paper; now, let's explore the sun and the moon.