

Coherency: Training for Coordinated Intent, Not Technique

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Never having been quite able to draw a line between movement and language, I have always had to spend a great deal of time justifying what seemed obvious to me. Advisers flinched at my double major in college, but not nearly so much as to stir up the waves I've played in professionally with my mismatch. I have, needless to say, spent a great deal of time observing how coded information is transmitted and translated within organized systems into a coherent language that tends to become, for better or worse, the determining factor of a physical system. As such, I offer my thoughts in the interest of engaging some lively debate. Aquatic Therapy and Aquatic Fitness have served as the forum for my observations.

I stand in awe within my profession as I watch pain or weakness give way to power and healing as soon as the circuitry that controls it is exposed and it is realigned according to its proper intent. The results are amazing, much more than could be anticipated from a simple movement protocol alone. There are certain underlying factors within the cueing and timing that determine whether or not or simply to what degree a "knee lift," or any token movement, is received as pain or pleasure. The motor action of movement might take place, but if the movement is equated with a negative association such as pain, the muscle will not fire. It is apparent that the degree to which the body is able to integrate new thought or new movement with balance and equanimity will determine how receptive it can be to healing and to fitness. The patterned physiological response the body tends to use to approach learning is the same as that which it uses for healing and fitness. All three are elements that involve "change," and of course, change requires "new work."

To explain: It is a given, for example, that any movement or exercise presents itself as "new work" to a person, even if he has done it a thousand times over, simply because the same "knee lift" action is framed within a new and different context when it is cued. This offers a window of opportunity to observe how an individual approaches the task of learning. Working with people in swim attire makes it possible to see the subtle ways in which we all tend to brace as we receive "new work." What is interesting is that a person will brace the same way when asked to tell you his name as he does when he is asked to perform a knee lift, even though the tasks are completely different.

In order to negotiate a receptive field, there is an advantage to working in water that we should develop and share with other professions. I call the water "truth." Lungs function as a buoy, floating at water's surface, allowing stabilization, but they can only do so when muscle

tension is released. Biofeedback teaches balance without bracing. Frequently I will ask people to close their eyes and move their tongues to different areas of their mouths, which demonstrates how sensitive the body is to the slightest imbalance. This also shows how the body tends to react immediately to loss of balance with a habit-formed bracing pattern, instead of responding with an articulated choice—redistributing the weight of the body as a whole. When you offer the body an opportunity to feel the difference between choice and habit, the body *knows* its mind, and the mind *is* primary in the operation. Once it has performed a movement as little as three times correctly with reference to the biofeedback, it is unable to remember any other way. The body itself has voiced its preference for “truth.”

This technique of giving an individual the control to his own circuitry brings dramatic results: Soft tissues are at liberty to return to an organizing pattern that more closely resembles their original “intent,” which is to support the axial skeleton. Pain is eliminated, range of motion increased, strength improved, and functional life skills augmented. The primary focus in the field in which we work is traditionally on performance, or how “what” is done, which then unlocks the door to specific benefits. I have personally found this focus to be secondary to how “what” is processed, or more specifically to the relationship between established thought and new work...learning.

It is interesting to note that we instinctively brace when we come upon something new, whether it be a cued move or a threatening face in our home territory. We even hold our breath when we reach a new sentence or when we realize a new thought has been voiced. Reading the body’s dialogue with the rational self tells much about how it relates to new input, just as clues from language convey tales of information about the body. Ancient wisdom, gathered from such varied sources as the chakras of yoga or just common language, is rich in knowledge about how our bodies translate emotions in response to life. When someone says “That just doesn’t sit right with me,” we can decipher the language of the body and we will see that “sit” tells much about whom “me” is with relation to the input. Unfortunately, the corresponding physiological response that accompanies the language is not always as evident except to the initiated. Sometimes language propels a patterned response, and sometimes a physiological attitude directs it, with language being only a secondary characteristic. But, when you develop an awareness of the process, close attention reveals that regardless of how the cycle is put into motion, the pair is continuously interwoven into one intimate dance. The point is, when the pattern determines what happens within us, we are no longer in charge, and these habits we form set the stage for loss of function and potential injury.

What is important is to recognize the coupling of the two. Eyes open to the process, we can avoid reinforcing the habit-formed bond between the pair that takes on the nature of a covert language. Automatically, we will then choose movement protocols with respect to the affect one has on the other, and within our cueing, we can provide complementary training for the sensory ability to ferret out habit-driven movements. This way, we retain the cohesive value of language and movement together as a tool. Naming is a valuable learning technique. Label or cue the knee lift and you have power over it to move. Yet, you also lose the subtlety of the movement that makes it invaluable to you. You box it in to a “forever” relationship with all other things you understand, which inherently limits your ability to integrate it to all things that you have never before imagined, body and mind together. In the desire to create coherency and fluency within our lives and our bodies, we should never lose awareness of the full spectrum of sensation, because ultimately that is a disservice to personal balance.

So how can we train in the context of creating not fitness, but sustained fitness? It is very possible to train for the ability to decipher the workings in the circuitry of language itself as they relate contextually to the patterns that are unfolding around us, and to do this through fitness activities. The body is a glorious model of the basic organizing patterns of life. The water, for its part, is a superb and multi-faceted biofeedback tool that can teach experientially how the first response to any new stimulus is a neural one, channeling intent to kick start stabilizers. If we improve our sensation of equilibrium by increasing our understanding about how we as individuals integrate new movement, or simply that next step, into our current reality, can we not then improve on the results we achieve? I see it can through the amazing speed in which pain can be resolved. How much more would we be able to do if we train the “muscle” that stabilizes the stabilizers?

Granted, learning how to dispel small discrepancies in rhythm and balance cannot be taught by “system,” because there is no one way, but we can teach “process.” The focus simply shifts from training as an end result to training for an adaptable reference point and an innate sense of how each step fits into the dynamic circuitry. We can learn to debunk parasites within us before they begin to define themselves into a language that controls our motivations, whether at a cellular level or simply for the needs of daily life. I hope you will go to the pool just to rediscover the feeling of cueing and timing in a supportive synchronization that more closely meshes with the natural cycles and rhythms within and around us all. Unleash language and revel in the power of the word.