

Being Grounded

THERE IS AN ARTIFICIAL DISTINCTION between mind and body. This separation of thinking and action from feelings, has caused an almost universal distance between us as bodies and what we identify as the self. Yet our feelings, our thoughts and actions are a connected, energetic bodily process.

Similar to the transmission of nerve impulses, breathing also generates a bio-electrical current, and touching generates an emotional current. Human expression heightens and combines electrical and emotional currents. The body is an electrical-emotional field.

Most people don't understand that this bio-electrical and emotional process is generated by cellular activity in the form of desire, a field that thrusts its

way toward actions, creating feeling. Desire is the ground of the miracle of living; what we experience emotionally is a bio-electric process. My desire shapes me. Desire is our ground.

All living tissue has in it a circulation. In the molecular world, one sees it as the flow of electrons. In the cellular, it is the flow of protoplasm. On the organismic level it is the circulation of fluids. At all levels, this movement creates shape and connection. This flow is called streamings. In the human realm it rests specifically on need and satisfaction. This is the human ground.

There is that which enhances this energetic streaming and there is that which diminishes it. We can dissipate it or we can focus it. We can let it live in one part of ourselves and deny it in another part of ourselves. Its amplitude and intensity are directly related to our involvement and experience in living.

To experience separation from our streamings causes us to behave as if we were trees uprooted from the earth: we lose connection with our source of nourishment, support, and ability to grow. We lose our groundedness. This loss is expressed in the shape of our body; it affects our uprightness. When we stand, we don't relate well to gravity. Disappointed, disapproved desire diminishes our dignity.

To be grounded is to be connected to our emotional-electrical currents, to the waves of our needs and images and the rhythms of actions which comprise our physical-psychic processes: the rhythms of the human and natural ground.

Grounding roots our needs and desires, connects us to the earth, which transmits its own flow to us in turn. It's an actual process of connection, communication and satisfaction. Stand on one foot; experience your feeling of connection with the ground and its effect on you. Now massage your foot, stand again, and re-experience the connection. This same process goes on between people. Increased contact is increased desire, the enriching of connection as sensation and image.

A person having contact with his own body is in contact with feelings, desires, sensations, and pleasures. At the same time, he feels related to the natural environment of which he is a part. He responds to the content and the interconnectedness of the natural world. When a person is grounded, his experience enables him to understand that he is a somatic process, that he is his flesh and blood.

A person who lives in his images, who denies his body's feelings and needs or tries rigidly to control them in such a way that he rises above them, acts destructively in relation to himself—which can mean anything from flagellation to asceticism to overindulgence. It is commonplace to do something to the body, as if everyone recognizes that the body is the ground of experience. By doing something to it one hopes to tap its energy. But in this way one uses the body instead of living it. One bullies it instead of participating in its processes.

We are animals, human animals. We learn either to participate in our animal ground or to affirm our

separation from it. For this purpose we have voluntary muscular and nervous systems that enable us to take something of value from our experience and, from that valuation, to create social behavior.

The organs of choice and freedom are already present when we are infants. At birth our self-regulation begins to emerge, and our extended childhood allows us to use our brains and muscular systems for experimentation and exploration, to aid in our self-formation and satisfaction. All other mammals deliver young which have a capacity to deal with the world quickly. The comparable human learning period (commonly viewed as a period of dependency) is five to ten times longer. The child appears to have been born deliberately premature, purposely unprepared for the world.

Premature birth puts us into the environment before our patterns have become fixed. This gives us opportunities for behavioral learning through timely, non-stressful situations in which we form our own patterns and learn to ensure survival in a variety of ways. Man is truly a uniquely adaptable creature, capable of changing both himself and his environments.

In the proliferating of his energetic process the child makes more and more contact with himself and his world. When the parent discourages this proliferating and superimposes patterns that represent his own ideals and conveniences, then the child's emerging rhythmicities become disharmonious, often to the extent of disrupting his connections with his ground.

The dynamics of superimposition were clearly experienced and expressed by a man who was in a workshop with me. After we had worked with his breathing for a while, he began to understand how an organism gains awareness of itself as its rhythms are reflected back to it from an outside source. He began to understand that as an infant's rhythms are perceived and fed back by the parents, the infant learns to know itself.

Summarizing his experience, this man wrote that, first of all, he became aware of the correlation between his breathing and the rhythm of his mental life—the rhythm of what he heard in his head. He said that this awareness put him in touch with certain mental distinctions of his which, in turn, gave him to recognize the two poles of his existence: self and mirroring. This latter realization enabled him to see that a child is born as an "it," an impersonal force, and that communication with the it-child is possible only through experiencing the child's rhythms (his breathing, feeding, crying)—by holding the child, changing the child, etc. A mutually synchronized rhythmicity occurs when the rhythms of parent and child reflect back and forth. This reflecting or resonating empowers the child's ego and gives him a sense of belonging in the world. An early sense of connectedness allows for the later emergence of disharmonious rhythms, so that the growth of individuality, which respects each person's boundaries, may take place without alienation.

In the womb, the mirroring of the child's rhythm by his environment is at its peak. As the child is born

and as his individuality grows, the mirroring becomes gradually weakened. Rather than reflect back the child's rhythm, the parents resume the asserting of their own rhythms. It is in the process of attempting to adjust his rhythm to that of his world that the child develops the two poles: self and other. Basically, this is how a child develops an awareness of "I," how he comes to know himself.

The same young man went on to write:

Awareness of "I" develops out of distortions; "I" develops as the result of a person's attempt to restore original oneness. Mental activity is predicated on the original oneness of self and mirror. The I, the center of awareness, moves from self to reflection of self by the world in an effort to restore this oneness, to conciliate differences, to make distinctions disappear. Seen this way, inner life is a dialectical process between self and self-image, trying to move back to an original synthesis or oneness. The more distortions and distinctions between self and mirrored-back-self, the more frantic is the pace of this inner dialectic and the more acute is the feeling of self-consciousness.

I pointed out to him that he saw natural development as a negative process, probably because he had problems in his early contacts with his parents.

Our freedom consists in releasing our energy from a narrow band of self-programs. Our long years of learning and forming enhance our ability to channel our energy through the voluntary neuro-muscular organs, including the brain. These organs permit us to unfold and to express our capacity for selection and differentiation—not only in our inner lives (imaginings, dreams, sexual drives, conceptual associations)

but also in the converting of our internal life into the public realm as unique social behavior. We do not live by bread alone. We must also satisfy our visions.

One time I was moving my shoulders, and I got more movement than usual in one shoulder by moving the arm in a certain way. The increased movement in that shoulder increased the stimulation to my brain. I was able to feel the difference between one shoulder and the other. I experienced more mobility in my body, which, coupled with the heightened self-perception induced by this mobility, opened my field of choice.

This one small experience is representative of the whole growth process. The expressive movements that we have learned for survival and for pleasure, over millions of years and during the interactive course of each lifetime, constitute the nature of our grounding and the nature of what we transmit to our offspring, by word and by example.

The principal difference between us and our fellow animals is our potential for deepening and intensifying that which arises from our living: the feelings, the inner movements, and the desires that give us the ability to experience and understand in a more and more profound way the meaningfulness and the joy of our being alive. Of course, if we use our voluntary organs to inhibit or over-control this potential for experimentation, the result is diminished aliveness, diminished motility, and the impoverishment of our emotions and sensations. Misuse of, and interference with, our essential natures grows us into our common

ailments: fearfulness, rage, confusion, doubt, frustration, and dissatisfied separation from our bodily ground—leading to anguish and despair rather than to a fulfilling of the great possibility for vitality and love with which we have been endowed.

The human animal is an energetic process. We are each of us a process that creates, replicates, maintains, transforms, and generates energy, which is manifested as desire, feelings, images, symbols, gestures, and satisfaction. There seem to be three stages in this process:

- a. *Vibration.* A resonating pattern, much like that obtained by throwing a stone into water or striking a tuning fork. The pattern of excitement forms a field of action, a continuum of oscillating excitation which transmits information that sustains organization. All cells and organs display this.
- b. *Pulsation.* The in-and-out of expansion and contraction, enhanced excitation and diminished excitation, inhalation and exhalation, intensification and relaxation, the buildup of hunger and its satisfaction, the waxing and waning of desire. All of these have crests and troughs. Rhythms are the rates and amplitudes of pulsation, its speed and intensity of replication returning, just as in the tides. One's rhythm of in-and-out is the basis for self-regulation, in sleeping and wakefulness, in hunger of all kinds.
- c. *Streaming.* The energetic patterns of rhythmic pulsation, on a higher level of organization, ex-

hibit a tendency to constant reorganization that appears as a flow. The pulsating continuousness of an organized electrical current tends toward elongation and extension, and density and compression. This process of constant reorganization sweeps the body on the long axis, head to toe and toe to head, whether the body is horizontal or vertical. But with the body in a vertical position, the intensity of the streamings is increased. Increase in intensity generates more focus and feeling.

Streaming is action. It is the organization of desire throughout the body. The expression of energy in the forms of need and action embeds the body in the world. Any interference with this flow provokes rage, anxiety, doubt, weakening of identity or its opposite: self-diminution, helplessness, and depression, or tenacity, adventurousness and hope.

Our bodies are a generating bio-electric ocean, which is manifested, as I said, as needs and feelings, sensations and intuitions, images and actions. This process also develops the membranes by which it contains itself, thereby giving us our shape. Just as the heart contains the blood that fills it, we can let our desires well-up and deepen. The art of self-containment creates self-awareness.

Containment is the means whereby the electrical-emotional current intensifies feelings and sensations, self-perceptions and world-perceptions. Containment comes about in the process of setting up and maintaining boundaries. It includes self-

collecting, self-regulating, and the forming of structures for knowing the world. The tissues of the body swell and make pools of feeling which act as visceral "brains." These unacted out desires, with their contained feelings and their non-symbolic mental counterparts (intuitions) reveal the living experience. Containment should not be confused with grasping and contracting, the images of possessiveness and apprehending.

The functions of containing and expressing energy enable us to accomplish the two dimensions of grounding: (1) connecting with the earth, and (2) expanding into the social world. It is through these functions that the child roots himself and forms the bridges from the infantile and adult environments. Interference with one's rooting and expanding is manifested in how one relates to the earth, reflected as poor bodily form, and in how one relates to one's social surround, reflected as misshapen connections with others. But if we are encouraged to develop our groundedness, we generate excitement which yields depth of feeling and imagination, visions from which we can ground our lives.

Shaping the Ground

OUR GROUNDING is a developmental process. Our maturity consists in the ripening tone and quality of our tissues and its emotional and muscular coordination. Our biological maturity can be seen in terms of tissue excitability and tissue motility—how the tissues are able to contain and express their urges. Everybody can tell the difference between the way a baby's body feels and the way an adult's body feels. And everybody knows that most men try to harden their bodies in order to inhibit their feelings. In the western world we have emphasized a maturity of thinking and acting while allowing the infantilization of our feelings.

Maturity is not the same as old age. Old age is a sickness brought about by misusing ourselves. Our maturity is our ability to take and to give, to take in

and to extend, to hold back and to express with minimal pre-conditioning. It's our capacity for sustaining what goes through us: our thoughts and images, our emotional tones, etc. It's our willingness to permit events to reveal themselves, to be who we are and to respect our limitations. In our maturity we build up our excitation, intensify it through containment, so that we can shape the situation. We contain a multiplicity of events, let them cook, and unify them into a coordinated expression.

Maturity depends upon tissue motility. Look at two dogs, one of which has been abused and the other loved. There is a qualitative difference in the juiciness of their flesh. If the cells are contracted and tight, responsiveness to the river of feelings is not supported by tissue tone.

Maturation of tissue is disturbed by chronic attitudes, chronic muscular contractions which limit the development of the flow of excitation—keeping it infantile or rigidifying it. I look for places of the body which are underdeveloped, places which indicate fragmentation or diminution of inner and outer movement.

Infantilism is prevalent in our culture because we rarely interact emotionally, or even bodily. The ability to respond emotionally and to develop a deeper and wider continuum of feelings depends on tissue receptivity and the coordination of neuro-muscular expression. Brain/muscle tightnesses arrest and impede our emotional maturation by interfering with the metabolism of feeling. They bank our cellular fires,

dam up our emotional-electrical currents. And it works the other way around: emotional injuries manifest as distortions, twists of the body's muscles and brain.

We use our muscles to satisfy our needs. We operate according to a gridwork of patterns which organize our movements into social action. Overusing a small group of these patterns leaves us poorly grounded. We have taught ourselves certain patterned responses to prevent specific movements. For instance, we have learned not to touch ourselves in the region of our genitals. This gradually comes to feel "natural."

We may inhibit our grounding because we fear pleasure, or because we're afraid that we'll be ridiculed or exploited when our excitement shows. We may inhibit our grounding because we don't know how to deal with change, with new experiences. Our groundedness returns to us when we learn to relax control, when we learn to participate with our own processes and those of others.

Since physical and psychological attitudes are two aspects of ourselves, contraction or its lack tells something about a psychological limitation, and vice-versa. Both tell something about how the person in question is grounded.

To clarify how attitudes determine people's relationships with their ground, I've categorized several responses to a grounding exercise that I use sometimes in workshops. This simple exercise, which consists of hopping on one foot and then standing again with

both feet planted, serves to intensify feelings. The interaction between feet and earth communicates information throughout the whole body, and the whole body responds to the extent of this relationship, giving rise to self-knowledge.

Some responses to the exercise indicated an attitude of waiting, which is one way to diminish groundedness:

I wait to be excited. I get pleasure in letting you do it, and double pleasure when you give it to me of your own free will.

There is a pushing inside me. The front of my body is tense. My arms are tense. I feel that I'll collapse. I feel a sulking, a reserve. I am always unsatisfied.

I am cautiously nibbling at life. I never feel sure of the ground. I slouch with my chest sucked in.

Waiting perpetuates my sense of injustice. It gives me a sense of power, too, and yet I continually feel unloved.

There were a number of responses that came from attitudes of wanting to please:

I want to please you. I want to show you how bright I am, how good I am. I feel important by making you feel important, and by making you notice me. I do this by keeping busy.

I am grounded in your approval. I perform a lot.

I like to excite you because I want attention. But when I get it I get scared and I close down.

If there weren't all those goals out there I would be afraid. I'd be on my own, and I wouldn't like that at all. Achieving goals makes me feel important, but to achieve I have to hold myself aloof.

I tighten my jaw, pull back in my throat and smile. I stiffen my spine, pull up the arches in my feet, and lock my knees. I float on the ground, ready to escape if need be.

When I feel my legs I feel a brooding anger, and this feeling frightens me because it makes me want to say "no" to others, to refuse them. To accept my ground would mean that I'd be alone.

Finally, there were several attitudes that had to do with being a helper:

I try to help people. When I do, I stiffen my neck and my legs. I hunch my back and encourage people to lean on me. I seek them out. I hold on to others because I feel empty in myself. I waddle with my head jutting forward. I like to rescue people in need even though I feel some grimness and bitterness in me when I rescue them.

In order to help people I have to plant my self in my feet, and this makes me feel solid. There's a lot of pleasure for me in this.

I feel that the essence of me is to change things. So I like to struggle. This gives me feelings of doing something. By contrast, I hardly ever feel sexual.

Even more generally, a poorly ungrounded state leads to physical and psychological attitudes of doubt. Doubt is a feeling of caution, with images of catastrophe. It provokes investigation which tends to defer action. It is the feeling associated with distrust of one's own responses, one's own body.

When the circulation of our excitement is constantly tampered with, this provokes doubt, putting us on guard against being hurt or rejected. Our structures can be so ridden by doubt, so hesitant and shaky that

we project our feelings onto the world, which then becomes a very unsure place for us.

Interference with our groundedness provokes feelings of worthlessness. This results in our continually needing to prove that we are right, that we are worth something. Worthlessness makes us be grounded in a shrinking way, or we compensate with combativeness in which we are grounded with a stiffness that prepares us, we think, for flight or fight. Or we resist compliance by digging in and being planted. But proving ourselves by imitating others or by being daring, even though it may elicit esteem, leaves us unconvinced of our self-worth at heart.

The organization of energy creates a continuum. A continuum of energetic events is called behavior. A person with a low vibratory or pulsatory rate has less energy and organizes his behavior differently from a person with a higher pulsatory rate. His behavior reflects the way in which his body is organized. In a tight, hard body or in a weak body the excitation is kept low. In a more flexible, more motile person the excitation is higher. In both cases the person's body reveals how he is grounded, how he experiences himself, and how he connects with other bodies.

Increased excitation is perceived as an urge to organize feeling into action. Our excitement has two roots. One is internal, an increase of our cellular metabolism which, through its expansion, presses for expression. The other is external, a charge of information from outside that we receive and respond to. The first is the result of our own process. The second

results from someone or something stirring us up.

Action, which can either intensify our excitation or inhibit it, is what we are doing. How we do it demonstrates our style of life: expansive, withdrawn, flamboyant, soft, heroic, polite. Our living experience is integrated in our bodily expression, which becomes a quality of tissue, a quality of structure as well as a quality of thinking and contacting and behaving. It is our self-continuity.

Our actions are muscular and can be identified either with our individual selves or with the culture. We can turn our muscle/brain organ against our instinctual self, restricting our innate desires and replacing them with cultural goals. Yet our muscles are also the organ of self-correction. If we hold our chest high to avoid feeling small, our first job is to undo this holding action. To destructure the contraction, the old way of doing, provides us with excitation that invites or reinstates connection.

Grounding raises trees with roots and branches. Roots establish a ground, a stance, a stance based on self-trust that affirms one's subjectivity, with branches that contact and connect with the social world.

We disrupt our energy flow by creating contractions in our muscular systems and in our organ systems, spasms that inhibit our normal flow of bodily excitation. Chronic contractions disturb our relationships to space, time, and gravity. They interfere with our ability to contain, form, and exchange energies with environment, family, and community.

When we examine a contraction and its emotional

accompaniment we see that psychological and bodily qualities are both manifestations of the same energetic phenomenon. With this insight we can begin to discern a few of the different kinds of diminished groundedness.

If you look closely at people you will notice that the body has some segments that have been used more than others. With some, the head seems mature (shows the experience of exposure to living) while the torso seems immature, held in, and the legs are drawn up tightly as if they have never unfolded. You might see this configuration in someone whose job involves contact with the public. The hands and face permit all the subtleties of aggravation and joy that come from this public contact. The forehead, the eyes, the lips, the cheeks, the fingers have on them the marks of having lived. They are testimony to a ripened capacity for dealing with internal and external events in these areas.

At the beach, you might see that this same individual is living a discrepancy. The rest of his body might exhibit no sign of the maturity of the hands and face. Everything from the head down may look unused, unbreathed, childlike, naive. Whether flabby or stiff, the torso may have only a small range of expression. Obviously it has experienced neither the contact nor the use that the hands and face have experienced.

What does this mean and how does it happen? We know that the natural development of the child takes him from the curled-up flexion of the infant to the extendedness of erect posture. It's a natural unrolling,

a very deep and dynamic learning process. To be able to reach out with one's needs and visions, to extend oneself in space, in time, and with relation to others is the most dramatic adventure of the growing child, and creates an emotional atmosphere that enhances biological connection.

Self-extending takes place in the emotional field shared with the parents; while tied emotionally to his parents, the child learns to establish his center of gravity, gaining self-esteem as his organs of independence start to function.

If I ask a person to extend himself, and this is a person who has not fully assumed uprightiness and all that is implied in learning to stand on one's own feet, a temporary openness results which evokes feelings in him—feelings of insecurity or security, weakness or strength. Many people resist experiencing feelings. But, if they allow themselves this experience, sooner or later they reveal specific emotional conflicts. There may have been an overly anxious mother who consciously or unconsciously forced the child to stand on his own feet too early, so that he still feels unsure in relation to gravity; or conversely there may have been a father who, consciously or unconsciously, was overly protective and instilled fears of independence. In either case, not only has a somatic immaturity been produced, but a whole emotional tone of unripenedness: this *is* the individual structure as an adult—and, for example, he literally goes weak in the knees when someone else makes demands. When a person finds ways to loosen his contractions, former relationships

with his parents come to light in feelings, dreams, and memories which he can then choose to maintain or to re-form as new behavior.

A contraction expresses the desires of the past in the present. The past gets structured in the body's form and also in the body's range of feeling and movement. For example, one says: I don't dare to feel needy, I don't reach out, I grab instead. When the contraction is loosened, one comes to be in the present with what is unstable and newly emerging. Simultaneously, one may be in the world *with* his past, but not *as* his past. Yet the loosening of a contraction does not reveal hidden abilities that are fully matured. It simply presents the opportunity for us to learn and grow, for new unfolding. There is no instant miracle.

If our relationship with the ground is tenuous, then our instinctual life and our body will also be tenuous. Our connection with the mystery of life will be tenuous. What we didn't know is that this weakened connection is structured somatically.

If we contract ourselves, we contract that which is universal in us. All of us are connected with the universal, first and directly with our mothers, and then with our own bodies, our own earth. For a child, the mother's body is the earth. As we grow and develop, our bodies become our ground, our universality.