

POSTURAL INTEGRATION, TRANSFORMATION OF THE WHOLE SELF

Jack W. Painter, Ph. D.



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It seems that most of us want to change, that we want to be more relaxed, healthier, more alive. But here lies the basic problem of human transformation. Although we say we want a different kind of life -- and may even be involved in many projects for improving ourselves -- there is a part of us which stubbornly resists any fundamental redirecting of our lives. This part of us, which refuses to let go, is our armor. We call it armor because it is that aspect of us which being afraid of possible pain and confusion, hardens and desensitizes our bodies and keeps our feelings and thought in careful control.

Our armor is all those well-developed postures for dealing with life --rigid neck, held-in belly, fat, rubbery waist. It is all those guarded feelings -- covered up sadness, held back anger, paralyzing fear. It is those often unstated but controlling beliefs -- if I try I'll be successful; if I am kind to you you should be kind to me. Reflect upon your own behavior. Notice the little tricks for getting through the day; how you get yourself going in the mornings, how you keep high but not in indulging in negative thoughts, how you put your best foot forward when you want to impress people. A large part of this behavior becomes second nature to us, set in motion unconsciously, and works well for us up to a point as it protects us from pain and confusion. However, this habits also limit us and in the due course of time form a rigid structure which then inhibits our spontaneity.

One of the main difficulties in changing ourselves is that this armor is largely unconscious but remains in control even as we try to modify a part of us. Each time we attempt to change our lives, we are in fact, using our already developed (and unconscious) postures and attitudes to deal with our problems. For example, if you over-arch your lower back, creating severe back aches, you might try to find a relief by doing yoga exercises. But you would probably concentrate on exercises which are easiest to execute and which at the moment feel good, such as arching your back even further into a fish or cobra position. In the long run such postures will simply increase your body imbalance and create more pain. Here an unconscious attitude is driving you to find relief, but in a way which reinforces the old body position. Even if you are very disciplined and work with yoga positions which flatten your back, you will, through the attitude you carry throughout your body, simply transfer the tension and imbalance to another part of your body. In flattening out your back, you may round your shoulders and over contract the muscles in your chest.

Or take another example. If you are very hard on the outside of your body, you may welcome very deep relaxing massage. You might through frequent and thorough manipulation of this hard exterior begin to soften --soften that is, on the outside. Much of this outer tension would simply shift to deeper layers of muscle and tissue. You still have a restrictive armor, only now it has been internalized. The tensions of the body are clearly inseparable from one another, and are part of our overall posture and habits. Work on any part of the body which does not also release the whole structure, the habitual attitude being our posture, is not transformation but simply a rearrangement of our problems.

But how can we affect our basic habits, our underlying structure? We may be tempted to consider our fundamental emotional and mental attitudes as a key to changing ourselves, but even when we go further and deal with the emotions and thoughts which are connected with our physical pains and imbalances, we encounter again a subtle evasiveness. Whenever I say that I am willing to explore every part of my body and deal with my thoughts and feeling as well I may actually be using an unconscious part of my armor. Here there can be a hidden, implicit message: "I try, but nothing ever works for me" -- a message which manipulates my body and mind even when I believe I am releasing both. In all our deliberate behavior there are such fundamental unconscious emotional and mental attitudes which have developed along with our physical postures and which govern our well intentioned efforts to improve our lives.

You may ask at this point: what kind of approach, what kind of process can help against such deeply ingrained unconscious defenses? I have found in working with myself and with others that what we need is a way of dealing with the entire self, the unity of every part of our body, the outside together with the inside, the unity of our bodies with our minds. As we change old, rigid body postures, we need at

the same time, also to change the accompanying rigid feelings and thought processes; or if we release blocked emotions and ideas we need to free simultaneously the muscles and tissues for new, more flexible movements.

I want to share with you a method I have developed over fifteen years of experimentation of work. It is a type of "body-work" -- that is a method which works directly with the muscles, the positions, the postures, and movements of the body -- but bodywork which is not work on these physical aspects of the self but which also is direct work with the emotional and mental attitudes expressed by these physical activities. I call this method or process -- Postural Integration.

If you are unfamiliar with Postural Integration as a way of working towards transformation of the whole person, you might be surprised when visiting a session. There you might find a practitioner hovering over an individual, bearing down with hands, fingers, or elbows, while the person sighs, moans, or even screams and kicks. You might see the practitioner working very gently: rocking, cradling and caressing the individual, encouraging deep breathing, or perhaps entering into a dialogue to clarify feelings and ideas. What sense could you make of all this ? It could appear to be a cult, ritual, or even perversion. But when we recognize that we resist change at both the level of body and level of mind, we can begin to understand the need for diverse strategies for transforming both.

Postural Integration is a bodywork in which the practitioner uses fingers, fists, and elbows to grip, twist, and shift layers of tissue and to reorganize the muscular system. This process is not bodywork in the sense that the body is being treated separately from emotion and mind, but is bodywork only in as much as the body is a tangible, immediately available shape or form for body and mind. The extraordinary power of Postural Integration lies in the willingness of client and practitioner to work with the client on many levels at the same time. As I encounter the body with my hands, loosening the deep muscular tensions, I look into my clients eyes. And as I apply pressure, I ask that person to share through sound, movement and words what is happening -- what is sensed -- felt and thought. By maintaining this contact, this open sharing, the practitioner can be flexible enough to change the emphasis of the work to meet the changing demands of the whole person. The practitioner and client together, now work with tissue, now with words, now with sounds -- all the time recognizing the physical, emotional, and cognitive unity of the process.

But surely considering our resistance, fundamental change of the self involves more than this momentary sharing, no matter how unified emotionally and physically. Indeed, Postural Integration is not just a momentary release. It is a systematic plan to deal with the entire self, a process in which we are guided by the practitioner, step by step, to rediscover our wholeness, our health, flexibility and spontaneity. The practitioners and the trainers of Postural Integration have

discovered in more than twelve years of experience -- experimentation, observation and sharing -- that in the process of unifying ourselves it is especially important that

- 1) we work with the different layers of bodymind, the outside structures and emotions as well as the deep inner musculature and its accompanying feelings;
- 2) we balance and regulate our level of available energy so that we are not stuck in a pattern of being weak and undernourished, or being explosive and overexcited
- 3) we assimilate and understand the changes we are experiencing, realizing that we can accept our old selves and yet be free for new experience.

Releasing Outside and Inside

Our development is a history of learned responses, many of which we turn into rigid habits for protecting us against pain, but which also prevent us from being complete and spontaneous. The earliest of these habits form the core of our resistance. During the traumas which we experience from the very beginnings of our being -- at the moment of conception, while moving along the Fallopian tubes, when implanting and gestating in the uterus -- we are already establishing patterns for protecting ourselves. We reinforce this developing core as we are forced to cope with the shock of birth, and then struggle through the oral, anal, and genital phases of our infantile growth. By the age of three or four years, we have almost fully developed our characteristic postures, our ways of avoiding pain and unwanted change.

The rest of our lives is usually a reinforcement of this core, years of similarly accumulated protective responses. But we make our armor even more complicated by creating more protection, a veneer placed around the core. For although the core is the most resistant part of us, it is also the most vulnerable to intense pain. A shell allows us to take some risks. If we get hurt there, it is superficial, and we are still protected at a deeper level. We maintain this basic division between core and shell in many forms. At the physical level we may develop the outer muscles of the body, what are anatomically called the "extrinsic" muscles. These are the large powerful muscles of locomotion, which power the movements in running, lifting, and throwing. We may develop these outside muscles as a method of overcoming our problems through sheer power and strength, but in the process we overpower our inner muscles, the "intrinsic," which initiate and coordinate our outer movements.

This imbalance, between a hard shell and soft core, in the extreme, leaves us muscle-bound and clumsy. At the emotional and mental levels, we might believe that if our lives are active enough on the outside, they will be active enough on the inside. If we become conscious of the overdevelopment of the outside of

ourselves, of the hard protective shell we have created, we might try to soften this defense by working gradually from the outside toward the core. One of the most frequently used strategies in deep bodywork is to work from the shell to the core. In this work the body is considered to be layered like an onion, and in order to affect and reach the inside layers, the outside has to be peeled away.

We can understand this approach to the body better, if we look, for a moment, at the nature and arrangement of the tissue being manipulated. The muscles of the body are wrapped in envelopes, consisting of a pliable tissue called fascia. This material organizes and guides our muscles by forming a system made of layers of tissue. On the outside of the body we have a large, all-encompassing layer, which like a big shopping bag holds everything together. As we go deeper we find individual sheaths for each muscle. As we develop rigid physical and emotional patterns of behavior, this system of fascia becomes less flexible, restricting our movements and overall bodymind attitude.

The strategy in this kind of work from outside toward inside is to soften and reorganize those parts of the fascial system which have become hard and stuck, and this, in turn, it is thought, gives mobility and balance to the muscles held in the fascia. I have found that if we begin working with the outside of ourselves in the belief that we can affect and make more available our insides, we overlook how our armor subtly shifts its defenses. The tension that we release superficially may simply move toward a deeper more protected place. It is, of course, important to respect the rate at which a person undergoes and assimilates change, and often the practitioner of Postural Integration will focus on the outside superficial planes of fascia, and then gradually go deeper. Yet when real transformation occurs, it is not only the outside that is changed. The inside is also simultaneously undergoing corresponding changes.

As I begin working with superficial layers of tissue, I am coordinating this work with the movement of intrinsic muscles such as gentle rocking of the pelvis or short, slight movements of the spine. Also as I work with the extrinsic musculature, as well as the outer feelings and attitudes, I may, for example, work simultaneously inside the mouth, which holds some of the deepest structures, emotions, and attitudes of the body. Rather than treating the body, the bodymind, as a many layered onion, we can begin, with the help of the practitioner, to feel it as a vibrant malleable mass, less viscous in some places than others but composed of the same interflowing stuff from outside to inside and from inside to outside. When touched at any level or depth, we can instantaneously respond, reshaping ourselves in every other dimension and part.

Charging and Discharging

Another way we hold on to our armored, defensive selves is either by holding back or by dissipating our energy -- our physical strength, our feelings, and our thoughts. On the one hand, we may feel the need to increase our energy without sufficient use or expression of it. We may be muscular, but unable to flow with this potential power; we may be rigid, refusing to express the anger we have accumulated; or we may protect ourselves with cautious opinions. On the other hand, we many tend to dissipate ourselves, without giving ourselves a chance to recover. We may collapse in overexhaustion; or we may express our feelings and thoughts without any control or sense of limits.

We can now try out new movements, explore new feelings and attitudes until they too become habitual and can be modified (but not given up) by spontaneous behavior. We can liken this process to the charging and discharging of a battery. As we build and nurture our strength, feelings, and attitudes, we store energy; as we express ourselves, we release this stored energy. This building of energy, its discharge, and recharge is a continuously repeated cycle. If we refuse to charge ourselves, we remain weak, looking for more energy. If we refuse to discharge, we become tense with the excessive held back energy.

Allowing the cycle of charge and discharge to flow in all activities of our bodymind gives a natural direction to our lives. This cycle of charge and discharge involves both the old and the new. I accept and use my past habits and attitudes, but I am free to be spontaneous. Each movement, each emotion, each idea takes the necessary space and energy to complete itself, but does not block the activity of the next moment. For example, as I begin to feel my anger, I need time for the irritation to grow, time for my energy to charge. And as my anger mounts I need time to fully express it, to allow it to discharge. If my building irritation, or the peak of my anger is cut short, I am left stuck in my frustration. Or if I continue to express my anger until it becomes a senseless rage, I block and exhaust myself.

Our respiration is the key to maintaining an easy balance between the charge and discharge of our energy. If we take in too much air, we build our energy without fully expending what is accumulating. On the other hand, if we throw out our breath with extended, contracting exhalation, we overextend ourselves. One way we can release this armor, is, with the help of the practitioner, to take attention away from that part of the breathing cycle which is overworked and focus on the neglected part. If your exhalation is excessive, if there is too much discharge, it is important to soften and slow down the exhalation, while supporting deeper inhalations, especially in those areas of the chest, belly, or back which are neglected. Conversely, when the inhalation is too great, you can shift attention from deep breathing to a larger exhalation, often encouraging exaggerated force and sound. And as the charge and discharge of our energy begins to equalize, the practitioner encourages what we can call "spontaneous breathing," -- a vibrating,

unpredictable movement of the whole breathing apparatus and eventually the entire body.

It is this kind of streaming energy which is essential to our finding and maintaining good balance and flexibility. As the practitioner enters the tissue, our legs, thighs, pelvis, and head now begin to undulate together with vibrating breaths in the chest and the energy we release through each exhalation returns in the next inhalation.

Accepting And Understanding

The practitioner of Postural Integration is responsible for being sensitive to how much pressure you can tolerate at a given moment. He or she needs to work on the border between relaxing massage and a deeper and sometimes slightly painful entry into the tissue. If the pressure is too light, nothing new is evoked; if too deep or rapid, then your armor would simply reinforce itself. You need to be confronted by your armor, but at a rate which gradually allows you to assimilate and explore what is happening. Finally, however, it is up to you to be receptive to the work of the practitioner, to experience those parts of the self which have been previously rejected and made unconscious. Along the way the practitioner can help you to understand important steps to be taken in the process of assimilating and understanding this experience.

Whether armor takes the form of a hard defense or soft cushion, it is initially developed as a way of avoiding pain and dissatisfaction, but becomes the habitual means by which we unconsciously hold on to pain. For us to experience this armor is for us to liberate ourselves from past attitudes and postures, but this in no sense is an avoidance or destruction of our unique personal histories. Encountering our armor is a distinct process in which we are freed from the past, and yet at the same time, make it a part of us. In order to be free from our armor we not only have to contact it and acknowledge its role in our lives, we also have to claim it as a part of us. Often we so deaden ourselves that we become totally unconscious of our defenses and continually create an environment where we need not encounter any problems. Everything is carefully made safe and uneventful.

The first condition for transformation is to sense and feel our incompleteness, to be frustrated. There comes a point at which you will begin to experience your resistance to change. Without this first step, no amount of tissue work, deep breathing, guided movement, or spiritual and mental affirmation can bring about a significant and lasting release of your bodymind armor.

The second step in the experience of release is the acknowledgement or recognition that frustration, this sense of incompleteness, is the problem itself. So long as daddy, mommy, or society are considered to be the cause of our problems,

we will remain stuck, even if we are aware that we have a problem. Equally, if it is "that backache," or "those aching feet," which controls us, we have not yet acknowledged or recognized our armor for what it is, namely our defense against ourselves.

The release we feel in letting go of our armor is not a mysterious event in which our burdens are relieved by some outside force. As the practitioner impinges on my body, I need to be willing to say "I'm resisting." With this recognition I may be feeling my struggle with myself, or I may simply be noting my resistance. Finally as a last step in the process of letting go of my armor, I need to claim my incompleteness, my pain and dissatisfaction as an important and welcome part of me. Now that I am responsible for creating my pain, I also accept it as a vital and valuable part of me. Here there is a seeming paradox: the moment I really accept my unwanted attitude, I become free from it. For example, when I accept my hatred for my father, the hate becomes complete, whole, and powerful, and I am ready for other feelings. Now that I hate my father I can also more fully love him. The pain that emerges from deep tissue work is transformed. It is no longer raw pain but an accepted and claimed part of me which is no longer simply pain, but rather a release from an old hurt. I become free from my past by making it a part of me.

During the process of Postural Integration, the practitioner encourages us to make complete contact with what is happening, to confront ourselves, and to claim every part of ourselves. We are then transforming our old, stuck pains into new free experiences. We are developing a consciousness which does not treat our bodies as objects to be analyzed and manipulated.

In many of the classical western models of consciousness, consciousness is located in one place, "here," while the object is located "there," and we try to extend our awareness under controlled conditions by analyzing different parts of the object or event. According to this view, I see the pain in my lower back as a problem to be studied, as the effect of causes which I hope can eventually be understood and eliminated. But this separation of the pain from me is the problem. As noted earlier, so long as I deal with my pain as something foreign to me, I armor myself against the possibility of truly exploring the pain and being released from it. Both the Zen and Gestalt views of consciousness make clear how the experience of being released is a process of claiming previously foreign parts of ourselves. When I fully contact, acknowledge, and claim a part of myself I am no longer just conscious of it as a separate object, I become the object. In Zen I totally blend with the object; I am both the observer and the observed. And in Gestalt therapy, I illuminate the partly unconscious background of my experience by letting the unconscious part of me speak out.

As the practitioner encountered the well-developed armor of my lower back, I felt the contact, I acknowledged my resistance to what lies deep inside me, and now finally I begin to claim my lower back by being there in it, talking from there to myself. "Jack, I'm hurting; you've got to slow down the everyday pace and give me the attention I deserve." Even if this dialogue goes no further, I have already begun to release the unconscious defense which I have stored in my back. This dialogue can continue. Not only can I release my armored parts, I can, through the now released parts, communicate with other aspects of myself which need to cooperate with each other, which need to try out new movements, feelings, and thoughts.

We can look at this method of accepting and understanding ourselves at a more technical level. We can look at the pain which emerges during our release of old postures and attitudes as a special, transforming event in the nervous system. According to one of the most commonly accepted explanations of the nature of pain, the specificity theory, a simple outside stimulus to the nerve endings in the muscle tissue leads to a general conditioned response experienced as pain, but this does not account for the direct contribution of local tissue (and its muscle memory to the experience of pain. What is experienced as pain depends not just on the response in the brain (and in turn on subsequent generalized responses in the whole system) but also on how the local tissue allows the stimulus to be received into the system. The specificity theory does not adequately account for the role which armor and the release of armor play in determining the reaction to the stimulus.

An alternative way to look at pain is to see the nervous system as a reciprocal unit with changes in any one part affecting every other part. Overall nervous activity is then not solely controlled by the brain stem, but lower centers also play a critical role. According to this view, as we saw earlier, the nervous system is taken as a complicated set of gates which open and close as stimuli pass through local receptors. What I feel locally depends not merely on the response in the brain alone, but in addition on how local tissue controls these gates. It is as if the gates in a certain part of bodymind were "set" by a previously painful experience, set by a protective armor which "freezes" the tissue in and around the muscle. If armor were to be considered permanent and unchangeable, the specificity theory of simple stimulus and response could account for much of our "stuck" behavior, for the gates would remain in their habitual positions and their influence would always be the same.

However, during the process of releasing our armor through deep bodywork, it seems that we may "reopen" some of the gates previously set by experience. In this view when the practitioner penetrates the body defenses, the tissue is restimulated and the client may re-experience the memories, the events held in the muscles. It seems that when we are willing to fully re-experience our previous

pain, we begin a process of truly permanently dissolving even our oldest and most stubborn armor. Thereafter the gates are no longer set by our armor, but are free to be reset for new kinds of integrating experiences.

Postural Integration, then, is a thorough, systematic process through which we can discover the unity of our inner and outer selves, find a balanced level of charging and discharging energy, and affirm (contact, acknowledge, claim) our past and present experience. It can be understood as a ten session process -- although many individuals may require more sessions -- in which each part of bodymind is freed of its armor and eventually integrated into the whole structure. During the first seven sessions, the legs, pelvis, torso, arms and head are each thoroughly and deeply released, and then, in the final three sessions are carefully brought into a harmonious relation to each other.

As our basic, defensive armor dissolves, a remarkable phenomenon occurs: the body tissue becomes markedly softer, more consistent, resilient, and also more malleable. This can be felt from the superficial through the layers of the extrinsic muscles, and even the deep tissue enveloping the intrinsic muscles is more available and responsive. With this release the body begins to find new proportions. Wide hips become more narrow, small chests expand, torsos lengthen, faces relax, buttocks fill and round out. In some cases an individual may gain as much as two inches in height and three inches in circumference around the chest. At the same time emotions and thoughts have become more flexible. One cries, shouts, laughs, sings, and groans more easily, and thoughts break free of their old limits.

And during the final phase of the process, integration, the practitioner helps us to stabilize our breathing, to distribute energy, to harmonize and make us more aware of our body movements, and to redirect our emotions and thoughts. The release and integration of the self through Postural Integration is a powerful, redirecting experience. This does not mean that we will no longer have difficulties or feel tension. There is a continuing need for us to express our anxieties and frustrations, but we can now more quickly recognize, confront, and let go of them.

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Center for Release and Integration
450 Hillside Avenue
Mill Valley, CA 94941
USA