

The Human Being as Somatic Process

A NEW VISION

AT THIS stage in the evolution of society, our psychology and philosophy of man stand in the same place, I believe, in which Newton stood in relation to Einstein. Man is described in ways linked to the old physics: man as an object, man as a robot with a spirit, man as a mind/body dualism, as a mechanistic accident. But man is not a machine with a mind or with a spirit. He is a complex biological process that has many realms of living and experiencing.

When we conceive of ourselves as a living process, we can talk about the aspects that we see as part of our living functioning: thinking, feeling, gesture, satisfaction, sexuality, dependency, individuality, community, love, and inner vision. Then we see that our organismic life, our life process is the ongoing orchestration of a multiplicity of events. And we are struck by the fact that from these events we form a unity, a direction, a cohesive life that continually shapes and

reshapes itself in the many realms of its functioning.

One of the outstanding facts about biological process is that we continually change our shape. Life builds form constantly. This is clearly illustrated by our embryological development, in which we form our infant bodies through a series of events. First from egg and sperm, we form a multiple-celled organism, then a creative being with only a rudimentary nervous system, and then a fetus with arms and legs and a recognizable human form. Finally we are a fully formed human infant. This same process of making and changing bodily form continues throughout life. If you have a picture album, and see over a period of thirty to forty years the images of yourself, you will grasp the notion that you have had many bodies in your life.

The somatic life is the life of the child, the adolescent and the adult. These are separate lives connected by memory through an enduring nervous system. We have the ability to form many bodies, selves, personalities, and to have many lives in our lifetime: like a plant that keeps flowering every season in a year, a plant with different bodies. We have a public body and a private body, a rational one and a non-rational one. When we can experience our lives like this, we can begin to appreciate the miracle of the life of our body, of our biological process.

There is what I call the long body. That body is the present history of all the bodies we have lived, from the egg-sperm implosion, through all the embryonic stages, through childhood to the present. This body keeps elongating itself throughout our life. But our past lifestyles can still be seen in the present shape of our bodies. The history of our past emotional satisfactions and dissatisfactions leaves its mark. If, for example, we have lived a competitive life, the scars of competition, like raised shoulders and fighting upper-chest breathing, may still be present.

How we can transit from one body image, a lifestyle, to another, speaks of the life of the body as it continues to grow, and holds a mystery, a well of deep joy. But most of us are educated to recognize ourselves by a static image or role, and we say, "that's me; that image is me; that body stands as me." We are forced too early, I believe, into roles that are identifiable and acceptable. And we acquire these roles, these bodies, by something we do to ourselves. We create action patterns which match that image of what we think we should be, and then identify with the action pattern we have created.

In this way, we may begin to think that we have a body which must obey us. We establish some mythical "I" and believe we no longer have to experience ourselves as a biological process. When this occurs, we lose the sense of the body

that we are, and the body we live; we lose touch with the forming of ourselves and think of ourselves as bodies and minds.

In the transition from any one body to another come the crises, the difficult stresses that reveal or make problems. Most of us do not know how to help these outgrowings become a new self. We tend to think of our maturity as a state of mind rather than a state of the body, and we do not know how to help the organism mature.

Because we have little understanding of our own biological process, we often experience ourselves as victims to the ongoing urge of the life of the body to shape itself anew. Because we have not been educated in how to live and participate in the emotional upwellings, the changing desires and the developing hungers of our life process, we often look upon the transitions of our life with dread. We miss the opportunities that are presented to us by our ability to change and form.

In trying to understand the life of the body, it is important to understand the steps in the human process. What are the steps in the process of our body forms, of our lifestyle? What are the steps that we go through in changing our minds, our bodies, and how do we go through the transitions from one lifestyle to another—from the body of a youngster to that of an adult, from the lifestyle of a competitive hunter to that of a cooperative family member?

It is important that you identify with the process of your own transitions. How have you affected your own change or been victim to the processes which forced you to change? And how can you participate in the process of self-formation, permitting growth to occur with you taking an active part?

If you look back at your life, you find a series of high points and low points—“that I liked,” and “that I avoided,” something there and something here, something fresh and something dim, and then a sense of duration. And if you look closer, you see those things that not only attracted you, but moved you in a certain direction and taught you things. Those events were your teachers, not in a moral sense, but in what actions were evoked or repressed. “I stopped laughing then.” “Here I became serious.” “Here I learned to imagine.” “Here I learned to lie.” “Here I learned shame.” “There I found distrust.”

The way in which you have accumulated information and experience and shaped yourself into a piece of behavior, how you have done it, becomes the secret to how you help yourself grow. In how you learn is the secret of how you unlearn. It is in how we learned to do things that the real answers of how to reorganize ourselves lie.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. If you write down on a piece of paper the events of your life connected with a particular emotional

reality, you will begin to notice a pattern of connection, a developing pattern of shapes that are linked. If you are afraid of authorities, for example, then write down the first instance of this fear, and then others, with parents or teachers. You will begin to get a grasp of the progression: first there is parental disapproval, then perhaps peer humiliation, or browbeating in school or feeling inadequate. Perhaps there is a fear of doctors, or police, or of your boss.

The next step is to experience the bodily connections that these images and memories have. There is a bodily shape, a configuration of feelings, a way of standing toward the parent or teacher or boss. You can begin to see the effect these events have had on the tensions of your body, how you have shaped yourself, the kinds of feelings you have expressed, and the feelings you have avoided. Maybe you can feel how you adopted a cringing attitude, or became a good boy or a good girl by avoiding the feelings of anger. Perhaps you have developed chronically spastic musculature, deadened the feelings of assertion, tightened your throat so that you wouldn't talk back. In this way, you can begin to learn how you have shaped yourself. This becomes the key to experiencing the process of your own formation. In learning how you have formed yourself in response to life situations, you are enabled to rework the way you use yourself.

The person who is capable of understanding his process is capable of being in situations appropriately or relativistically, not in a stereotyped way. This gives the opportunity not only to experience the actual situation he is in, instead of his image of it, but to shape himself and the situation; i.e., to make his world. This frees him from being stuck in behavior that is obsolete for his survival. He can give it up, leave it, and reformulate the nature of his actions and images, based upon the nature of his experience.

Through this book, you can educate yourself in the perception of your process and in its language, be it emotional or in the form of urges, images or feelings, and to experience your thoughts, feelings, and actions as bodily events that are muscular, visceral. In this way, you will be able to learn and translate your experiences into a new way of using yourself.

Experiencing our process teaches us how we learn to change our bodies and how this becomes a lifestyle. Being with the process of how we change and form, creates excitement, challenge and satisfaction. There is risk, but that risk adds zest to life rather than distress. We are part of a living process in which our subjective experiences have a lot of weight in how we form and shape our life. Growing is an attempt to introduce experiences about the nature of living which can help free us from concepts and feelings that no longer

apply. It is an attempt to give room for your feelings to express themselves in the nature of new images, for new possibilities to find expression in the present rather than living out outmoded world views. In doing this, you can learn to sustain those internal states that give you the feelings which make life enjoyable, as well as create those values which have been the ongoing drama of all individuals.

My hope is that this book can help people live from their biological process so that they can create their own life, generate their own values and see change as a part of the living. The reward is an emotional deepening and a broader spectrum of satisfaction.

The Life of the Body

HOW WE SHAPE
EXCITATION AND FEELING

IN ORDER to understand the idea that we make our bodies by the way we live, it is necessary to understand the basic life process of excitement, and how we shape it. The body is a river of events and images, the stream of our goings on—our thinking, feeling, action, desiring, imagining, a current of motility. This current of tissue metabolism which constantly shapes and reshapes itself as our bodies we can call excitement.

Excitement is the basis of experience. It is knowledge, information. Excitement is the basic pulse of life. It flows up in a burst of illumination, it retreats to re-charge. The body is an ocean of biological excitement, manifested as urges and desires, generating new shapes and movements toward satisfaction. How we live it tells us about how we shape our lives.

All of our various feeling states represent different shapes of excitement, different densities

and intensities. Excitation has qualities and tones—soft, hard, gentle, irritating, brittle or firm. We categorize these different qualities, heighten these feelings, and then express them as emotions. For example, an aggregate of feelings comes together and we develop the emotion we call love, which is composed of lust, desires, caring, tenderness, warmth or joy; or another aggregate of feelings we call anger, which may be composed of arrogance, irritability, shouting, or striking. All of us recognize and respond to these different patterns of excitement.

How we choose to let our excitement expand and grow, how we choose to express or not express it, reveals us. Many of us have an investment in dulling ourselves to never show being excited, either from deep disappointments or fears of being foolish. We can recognize the kinds of excitement people live by the shape of their bodies and the gestures they form. Where there is too much restraint, there is a boundness as if the world must be constantly warded off; they look muscle-bound. People with these bodies do not allow their excitement to expand and grow, living in patterns of continual constriction, they keep their energy constricted, reaching out as little as possible; they are over-orderly and over-restrictive. People with no restraints or weak boundaries are victims, surrendering to every impulse. They have shapes that are weak, and toneless, like

warm jello. And generally they have developed patterns of explosion, in which they permit their bodies the catharsis of impulsively unloading excitement, like children instantly acting out all needs and feelings. In short, one kind of person has a weak container, the other an overly rigid container. One pushes life down, one lets his process leak out, erupt. One compresses himself, presses life in; the other expels life.

If one is neither too bounded nor too unbounded, the steps of his own process of excitement begin to be contained, and a direction, or organization of feeling emerges. One experiences one's own inner law, one's own inner formative process, one's own self-organizing, one's own life direction.

One of the most common patterns today of non-participation, of resistance to the self-organizing of excitement, is what's called the "explosive" style, the actor-outer. In the past, it was the depressive, the rigid one, the chap who over-controls himself, super-independent, the over-private person, the inner-actor.

The explosive style has become a very popular if misguided approach to satisfaction, be it for power or pleasure, replacing the rigid type, the over-controlled person. For the explosive person destructuring is impulsive. Both explosive and rigid folk fear not feeling alive, but the explosive people handle this by erupting. There is little joy

and very little trust in these life processes. This pattern of excitement may be a response to unmet needs, or to high stimulation from the environment, or to an innate high-energy level whose expression is somehow inhibited. Whatever its origins, it presents a functional inability to contain excitement.

The urge to express excitement impulsively is a natural urge in children, but as we mature, we become more and more able to contain and extend excitement, we become increasingly able to hold gently, to love deeply. People who habitually erupt, who constantly explode, are people who have not formed a personal structure that will contain and expand their excitement. Consequently, they are unable or unwilling to feel themselves or to form their lives. They do not allow their excitement to grow into feelings; instead they act at the level of sensation, the level of peripheral, external excitability—in short, they live an unbounded life. They use others to give them a skin, a sense of themselves. They are like a stew always boiling. A basic characteristic is an explosive overactive, overdoing, or a depressedness with fits of eruption. While the overbounded person curtails his excitement, always avoiding externalization, the explosive person shrinks the human dimension to provide a relief from excitement.

Whether we are involved in stiffening or un-

bounding ourselves, we often take the attitude that "this is the only way", or "this is the answer". This self-righteous attitude rationalizes both our compulsion to express ourselves and the violence that we do to ourselves. We try to dominate ourselves this way; we manipulate ourselves by judging, by criticism. We try to prevent ourselves from changing, from allowing ourselves to reorganize, by developing rigid bodies or unbounded ones. We stiffen ourselves until we no longer respond emotionally, or we explode until we are exhausted. Laurel and Hardy are good examples: the overbounded broomstick, and the underbounded clown.

Our attachment to activity, our style of excitation, usually stems from fear of collapse, failure, or dread of helpless instability. We fear the heights and depths of our own excitement. Above all, we abhor the open-ended pulse of our formative process, which includes feelings of powerlessness as well as feelings of power, instability, security, emptiness, fullness and wholeness. We want power, we want potency, but we will not risk even momentary powerlessness for the sake of contacting the power inherent in our own formative process.

The important thing to recognize is how one lets excitement arouse one's body and in what form: how one lets excitement go through him; how one permits or prohibits oneself to be excited;

and how one lets oneself be excited with others and with oneself. One way to do this is to keep a history of the path of your own excitement. Simply note, day by day, the ways you have handled your excitement in various situations, with your spouse, or friends, at work or while walking down the street. You will soon begin to see a pattern to the ways you have permitted or restricted your excitement in different areas of your life and in different areas of your body. You may begin to perceive how you perpetuate a particular level of feeling and expression. You may be able to see that excitement calls forth feeling responses. These feelings, whether negative or positive, love or hate, spread to fill us, to expand us. They connect us to others, link our thought and action, and also make life passionate.

But so many of us have stopped our emotional growth so early that we are frightened of the spontaneity or the impulsiveness of behavior we believe our feelings will lead to. When feelings begin to rise up for many people, they feel they won't be able to do anything, that they will be victim to the feeling. Most of us constructed a lot of self-reliance on our ability to suppress our feelings—not crying, suppressing being angry, hiding laughter, concealing needfulness. We feel our real strength in being able to compress ourselves dead, pretending no feeling and separating ourselves from others.

This is understandable when we look back at the history of our excitatory life. Early feeling is tied directly to the expression of need, be it for contact or nourishment. How these are satisfied or responded to provokes either frustrated kinds of feelings or loving kinds of feelings. If we feel hungry, we need to be responded to; if we need physicality, we need to be touched. Children who don't get what they need begin to feel victimized by their own feelings. The child who needs to be responded to and can't get the parent to respond, or the child who needs approval and can't get approval, begins to experience feelings as dangerous. When a child feels sad and his crying is unnecessarily ridiculed, he begins to feel sadness as his enemy. Or if he's punished for his independent feelings, then he gets to know that these feelings are dangerous. When a child learns he is punished for crying, for anger, for seeking warmth, for laughter, then his readiness to touch, etc., are identified as an enemy. That is, those feelings and those actions become signals that we learn are dangerous. We begin to construct an image of feelings as dangerous and institute a series of bodily patterns that attempt to suppress our feeling or channel it in another direction.

When we have a readiness to be assertive, we may generate internal images, pictures in our heads that we will get punished, tied up to patterns of shrinking or lifting our shoulders to lock

in our heads. When we have a readiness to act lovingly or a readiness to act angrily, we may also develop a concomitant protective pattern based upon experience that we will be rejected. So we generate muscular attitudes of shrinking or contracting ourselves to protect ourselves from rejection.

As you trace the pathway of your excitation, you can begin to identify the feelings that emerge. These feelings may be loneliness, sadness, anger, sexuality, or longing for contact, and they may provoke fear, discomfort or dislike. Once you have begun to identify them, you can begin to experience how you try to avoid and control those feelings. What is it that you muscularly do to keep those feelings "under control" in public, or within yourself? Do you squeeze your throat, grab your fingers, compress your chest, tighten your abdomen to deny being vulnerable there?

By following your excitation, you can also begin to experience that there is a particular level of intensity at which you begin the physical attempts to control a particular feeling. Perhaps you will begin to get an understanding of the fear that is embodied in these physical actions such as, "I am afraid that when I want to reach out for affection, I will be rejected. If I express my anger, everyone will leave me, or I will be humiliated."

Feelings seek response. If one is crying, one is not only crying to relieve the pressure of the situa-

tion, but because one wants a response from the world. When we become aware of what our feelings are aimed at, who they are aimed at, and what kind of response we want, we can begin in another way, to live with them. When we begin to see which of those feelings we are frightened of, and at what point in intensity, we can begin to know how we are frightened, how we generate our fear muscularly, and how we generate the images that provoke us to feel frightened. We are then enabled to work with ourselves in a way that can bring us the ability to live with different qualities of feeling and excitement.

I worked with somebody who at a certain level of excitement was overwhelmed. Whatever excitement mounted, he was in danger of being swept away, overwhelmed and over-emotional. He felt he became passive to his feelings and victimized. When he described how he overwhelmed himself, he could identify that level of excitation where he could tolerate the feeling of sadness. Beyond that level he began to be out of control. The sadness that the excitement brought unbounded him. He began to shake, a movement like a sobbing; and he then became a victim, began to lose muscular coordination and the ability to hold back his emotion. There was a certain place where he could have the feeling and then a certain place where excitement mounted and he began to be uncoordinated and overwhelmed. I suggested

that he go up to the point at which he could bear the feeling of being sad or glad or excited. Then when he began to recognize the signs of being swept away, to institute muscular contractions that would inhibit the excitement just a little bit, so he could live with this feeling and not be destroyed by it. Then he was able to escalate it a little bit and learn to live with that; then to be able to pull back.

In experiencing your own excitation you may find that you have to tighten your throat if you haven't learned how to turn your feeling of screaming into the feeling of protesting verbally. Or you have to learn how to let tears begin to flow in statements of sympathy or in statements of what you have lost, or to feel the sadness without hysterically sobbing on one side, and being tight-throated and tight-chested on the other. You can learn to use the muscular pattern of your getting ready to cry, to actually cry, or to express the sadness verbally, saying "I am sad", or to recognize you don't have to cry. You can protest, and pull back from the screaming. In this way, you can begin to develop the spectrum of your feeling expressions. In doing or working with these things, you will begin to see that the process of feeling is many-dimensional. It may be love and hate, grief and laughter, desire and disgust, or love and aggression.

We have many feelings and they may be in conflict with each other. We can feel sad and angry at the same time. We can want to be friendly and guarded; we can want to reach out to touch and hit simultaneously. A way to experience this is first to feel the complexity of actions and the complexity of feelings, to see where they are located in your body—the anger in the hands, the sadness in the chest, the clinging or hitting in the fingers. Then let that part of the body complete the action. Clench the fist and reach out, lift the chest and put the chest down, let the pelvis reach out sexually, let the jaw look angry. Allow the whole organism to express the different feelings and the different action patterns.

Learning to move parts of your body as an expression of sadness or anger will be a form of dialogue by which you can then help yourself live with your feelings. You will find that conflict is not a problem only. It is a source of richness. Being able to live with mixed emotions and mixed feelings is an art, expressing our complexity.

Another dimension of the emotional life you will discover as you continue your exploration of excitement and feeling is that feelings are meant not only to evoke responses from other people, but also to keep people at a distance. So you could ask yourself, how do the feelings that I am having distance people or bring them closer?

How one creates distance and how one creates closeness become very important in understanding how one lives with sadness, gladness, joy, or despair. You can begin to see whether the excitation, the feelings are heading toward being including or excluding. Do you want to be part of, or do you want to be outside of? Can you be distant without feeling abandoned? Can you be included without giving up your individuality? Feelings mean to be inclusive in certain situations, but they should not mean to make you a servant. Distinguishing that difference becomes very important.

Perhaps you will begin to experience that you attempt to distance people by withdrawing into yourself, pulling in your shoulders, squeezing your chest instead of asking them to leave or leaving yourself. You may want to retreat, but always feel an obligation to stay, accompanied by concomitant feelings of frustration, anger or helplessness. Or when you begin to feel close with someone or intimate, you may find that you are stiffening yourself. As your desire for contact increases, you may institute a pattern of holding yourself bodily, accompanied by fears of being overwhelmed, rejected, or ignored. You may find yourself overexciting yourself or stilling your excitement as you desire to come close or as you desire to withdraw.

Here again, once you have learned the pattern of your own responses, you can begin to rework

them if you are inclined to do so. You could, for example, begin to ask people to leave when you want to be alone, or permit yourself to withdraw when you have had enough contact. You can begin to soften yourself somewhat as you get closer to someone. Perhaps you can allow more excitement, or permit yourself to be less explosive or cathartic.

In talking about how we shape ourselves, what should become clear is that we are capable of living many levels of feeling and excitation. One can react to one's feelings by grasping, holding, not letting go, like squeezing a fist, "I am not going to let this feeling go", like penny-pinching, or a desperate attempt to control the feelings from embarrassing or overwhelming oneself. Or one can explosively erupt with feelings, act them out, never to be in control of oneself. But we are also capable of keeping our feelings inside us without compressing or squeezing, to contain them, and allow them to move us toward pleasure and satisfaction.

Being able to contain ourselves, to live our somatic life, gives us the opportunity to learn how excitement and feeling build up and satisfy themselves. We can learn to allow the readiness of action to sustain itself until we are ready to act appropriately. Experiencing how we shape excitation and feeling teaches us that we can participate with ourselves rather than over-control

Somatic Organization

ourselves. We can learn what self-expression is and what self-management is, and not have fixed images of how we should satisfy ourselves or what will satisfy us. We learn that self-expression is finding those modes of acting which build our lives and give us meaning and pleasure.