

Behavioral Movement Communication in Two Cultures

By Joseph Britton

The Tao teacher asked his student what he was seeing.

The student replied, "It is a man walking."

The teacher responded slowly, "Look deeply. What are you seeing?"

The student watched closely for several moments. "It is walking in the form of a man."

The teacher's walk smiled as he left the room.

Communication is a process that unfolds meaning. In the exchange above, the student was able to perceive, and in turn realize, an identifiable process in space-time shaping, walking. Its particular characteristics defined a man.

Communication is also the fabric that molds a relationship. That relationship could be in a teaching setting, seminar training, marriage or watching a cloud drifting through the sky. But the communication, of what is it made?

This leads to my interest in the shifting nature of relationships created by the conscious crafting of the process of communication. In this paper I will explore the quality of body movement and its relationship to communication.

It's the evening of the 20th of July 1997. Harry has come to meet Tom and I at the Philadelphia Airport in a very used van. We drive through endless blocks of gutted, window broken, inhabited apartment buildings. Upon arriving at our destination of New Jerusalem Laura in northeast Philadelphia, Sister Margaret, the founder, greets us with a big warm hug and smile. Others living in this drug recovery community soon join in with the welcoming. One man – in his late 30's, black, handsome, astute, with short, yellow hair is particularly striking in his sophisticated demeanor...it's Dane. Dane is a clothing designer with terminal lung disease, hooked on medicinal steroids and recovering from cocaine addiction.

It's 1:00am.. The city's still hot. The window in my room flaps throughout the night, opening and closing as if it's catching a breeze. Heavy, low frequency rap music from the street periodically pounds through the house. My body vibrates. A thought whirls around in my head, "Hey, wake-up! Where do you think you're at, boy?"

It's time to arise. The sun has come up. At 9:00am. the Basic Alternative to Violence Project (AVP) workshop begins in a formerly uninhabitable, small, 4 story building. The recovering addicts have cleaned it up and painted it...certainly good enough for seminars. 12 new-to-the-program recovering addict residents, along with myself, Tom,, Sister Margaret and a few residents who serve as assistants will spend the next 3 days together in this room. The people here move to the mechanical rhythms of the city...accelerating, slowing to a stop, screeching around a corner, along with a lot of vocal horn honking.

Being here, I will become the street...its movements, smells, sounds, cries, laughter, and the people who walk along me.

Communication that arises from distinct behavioral movement patterns often has a profound effect on the people who perceive it and a somewhat subtle effect on those who don't. In presenting oneself, appearing before others, there is not a static identity or well-formed self-conception to cling to. The nature of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual self is forever contracting or expanding as it interacts with everything in its perceivable *field*. The field includes, but is not limited to, the audience to whom one is addressing, the physical and emotional setting, weather conditions, sounds, smells, along with various forces and feelings of an unknown or not directly recognizable nature. For the purpose of simplifying and clarifying a rather complex idea, I will address the field as the perceived reality that encompasses one's life.

Space-time shaping occurs within our field. Its process is perceived as the movement of energy flows and change. Its nature gives definition and meaning to life. All forms of movement effect all aspects of our field in varying degrees. As chaos theory has shown, the most minor of influences on a system over time creates a most dramatic result. This phenomenon is especially observed in chaotic systems as in weather volatility, stock market fluctuations, the random firing of neurons in the brain, the human heart beat or the creation of a poem¹. For the presenter, this is often seen in the ebbs and flows of rapport with the audience.

The field and self form one unified process. All existence within the process are interdependent and co-reactive. All shape the process of reality and are shaped by it with time. All movements of one's body and mind affect all others within the field. Though the effect is usually imperceptible, at other times it can create a dramatic emotional, mental or physiological response in others.

Today's quantum science, which is also known as a Bose-Einstein condensate, states that everything is comprised of patterns of dynamic energy. The ground state of all energy, that of which we are all excitations, is known as the *quantum vacuum*². The quantum vacuum is far from empty; it is full of the potentiality of all that can ever exist. It is though empty of characteristics that one might perceive in the *field* because all characteristics, all qualities, are excitations and the vacuum is unexcited. While unmanifest, our mind can only relate to it as stillness. In the field though, we experience it as movement in space-time shaping.

In analyzing movement, I first look at the quality of the body movement, or as I have earlier called, space-time shaping. The quality includes flexibility, freedom, bodily alignment with the natural flow of gravity (leaning, bending, withdrawing, sinking down, rising up, twisting), along with directed and non-directed movement patterns. These aspects of quality determine: the *manner* - how it looks; the *energy* - from lethargic to exuberant; and the *timing* - how slow or fast is the movement expression unfolding.

¹John Briggs & F. David Peat, *Turbulent Mirror*, Harper & Row, New York, 1989.

²Danah Zohar, *Soul at the Edge*, *Caduceus*, vol. 39.

In becoming an accepted, trustworthy, clear communicator of a social group, it is often required to embody its established movement patterns of expression. These patterns tend to be a reflection of the beliefs, philosophies, rules and collective perception the group has of itself.

There are 20 African-American women in the room. Most have been in the recovery program for several months. It's hot, crowded, and noisy. I have been asked to speak about and, in turn, demonstrate professional business mannerisms. Monica, a bright, attractive woman in her 20's, has given her okay to have the group analyze her movement. She has been asked to walk in her natural way. Many begin to laugh as Monica, with head held high, moves with ease and freedom, especially in her swaying, unhinged hips. "Classy," "Sassy," "Turn-on," "Hot," "Unprofessional," they shout out. Socially, she's got it. Businesswise, she's lost it. Monica responds, "This is what makes me feel good...and I'm not about to change."

As above, movement is consciousness taking form. Posture, in turn, is movement that has stopped; a dominant, unconscious, emotional theme that has been frozen like a picture.

My interest here lies not in what has popularly become known as body language, but rather in the process that leads up to the postural form.

Movement primarily comes from 2 sources: *cultural movement behavior* (CMB) and *personal movement behavior* (PMB). CMB are movement forms learned from our social environment including family, friends, groups, and organizations. PMB has its origins in the family genes, accidents that have created bodily harm, and in emotions that have or continue to deeply affect us. PMB are repeatable patterns of movement characteristics that uniquely identify us.

In Japan, with a long history of its rulers determining social behavior, certain aspects of CMB were nationalized. This was certainly the case during the Edo Period from about the year 1600- 1868 when mannerisms took on an extraordinary importance. This was clearly demonstrated in the high arts of *shodo* (calligraphy), *kyudo* (archery), *jujitsu* and *sumo* (martial arts), *ikebana* (flower arrangement), *noh* and *kabuki* (theater), among many others. More important to the common householder though were the required rules of social politeness and behavior. These rules determined the who, what, when, where and how of communicating with others within the different strata of society. Disregard for these rules could engender shame for one's social group and, in turn, a severing of relationships. In the extreme, it led to personally induced suicide or, in its ritualized form, *seppuku*, to uphold the associated group's honor. Regarding *seppuku* though, two things stand out; first, that this means of suicide was often forced upon the person as an honorable way to die...rather than being beheaded or shot with bullets and second, that the manner in which it was carried out was prescribed and formalized. When the recognizable, predetermined motions were successfully carried out, the intended communication ensued; in this case, the degree of gracefulness in form leading up to the

act, along with the maintaining of a sense of dignity while simultaneously self-mutilating oneself, determined the quality of inner character.

Institutionalizing CMB has a great deal of accepted support in today's Japan. In school, it begins with the youth... *the playing field in Tondabayash-shi, Osaka is filled with endless rows of energy-packed, yet attentive toddlers, each line with matching colored hats and short pants that identify them as a group... and different than the line next to them. A Disney theme set to marching music calls all to attention. The pounding of the drums seems to awaken the god of the thunderclouds as rain quickly drenches all below. It becomes part of the performance. Wet, shiny knees pick up to the beat of the drum as little arms swing in unison. Their movement creates colored patterns on the brown, muddy earth. The head teacher shouts through the rhythm of the rain.. A resounding "Hai!" is returned. She bows. They return the same. She calls out, "Banzai!" And like fireworks all the arms shoot into the air shouting "Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!" in thrilling unity. They begin to march off the field; young rain sparkled faces beaming; Moms proud with clenching hands at their chest. Of course this all teaches discipline, respect for authority and how to work harmoniously with one another.*

In Japan, CMB is deeply embedded. In rock concerts the singer gestures and the entire audience follows with the same swaying and waving. In corporations, the formalities of *aisatsu*, greetings and presenting oneself and things, are paramount for success and acceptability. In *omiai*, arranged dates with the hope of eventual marriage, have taken on the appearance of a modern day courting dance. In traditional Japanese dance, *buto*, the themes are conveyed through repeatable expressions of the head, eyes, arms, hands and knees with limited movement in the hips. As a reflection of society mannerisms, restriction in pelvic movement is seen within both men and women. Some speculate that it's from many centuries of wearing a kimono for women and for men a postural attitude that compliments a fighting preparedness...as in judo or wielding a samurai sword. I surmise that it's a form of beauty and power that takes hold of the imagination which is richly stimulated by a sense of minimalism; all conveyed by flesh and movement unseen.

Japanese CMB is physically joint-locked and controlled, and emotionally suggestive. Afro-American CMB is loose, rhythmical and emotionally expressive.

It's 7:00pm, our 3rd day at NJL. A few of us drive over to the Recovery Cultural Center that serves as the primary meeting place for ODAAT (One Day At A Time) started by Reverend Henry Wells. Rev. Wells, an ex-death row inmate and drug addict, transformed his life and is now assisting thousands of others in this urban culture to break free from the bonds of addiction. The Center is a former church, a solid turn of the century stone structure. We walked up the stairs into a large open room illuminated, contained and held private by stained glass windows. In former days this was the main assembly hall where worshippers sat in rows of pews while listening to the Preacher, singing Christian hymns and praying. Now, there is a circle of about 60 black, metal, folding chairs, soon to be filled with the human tapestry of the greater neighborhood. The big door opens. Looks of hope, desperation, courage and big, loving smiling faces enter. One woman with her chest inwardly depressed and head down walks along with a companion

carrying herself proud and tall. Behind them, a man moves with the language of the street – a swaying from side to side with the left shoulder dipping down while the left foot moves forward, changing to the right side down as the right foot goes forward. This movement is disarming and carefree, yet creates a wide tract through which he advances, like the spreading of plumes when an unknown has entered a bird's territory. He meets a friend with an elaborate hand, fist, and finger greeting ritual. Few words are spoken as they sit down.

As in the account above, CMB is an outer expression of the trust given to and received by the group...an acknowledgement of belonging to it.

PMB is your movement signature that uniquely identifies you. It's the twitch of a nervous body, the pounding feet of the angry mother moving through a room, the gliding along the tatami mat of a Zen master, the head stretched out too far in front of the body of the college student spending long nights on the computer, the hard immobile shoulders of the overworked business man, the slumped upper back of the emotionally and physically burdened single older woman, or the stone-faced rigid movement of a bored lecturing professor.

It's 9:30am at the AVP workshop. We're sitting in a circle looking deeply into the nature of anger. Jamal, 20 years old, slender, short, African-American male, head drooping down, eyes unable to make contact with others, began his story in a flat, evenly paced, low volume manner. At first, the expression sounded emotionless, a potential sleeper for the other participants. Breathing deeply he became bigger in his seat. The others did not move. The room was quiet. Very quiet! "I ate rat poison often...at times I'd lay on the kitchen floor, close the doors and turn the gas on...sucking paint thinner was my enjoyment...been shot 5 times, once in the head...my sister tried to shoot me with a gun, but it malfunctioned. Now, I often dream of bombs, killing, and burning an entire city block down to ashes." For several minutes, a big genie was let out of the bottle. With his final word, the body contracted back into a diminished semi-sphere.

The observer subconsciously links the PMB with the personality of the one observed, as in Jamal's withdrawn, cocoon-like behavior. Observation of the manner, energy and timing of the movement expression induces character judgement. The position of crossed legs or arms, finger movement, or the handshake brings very little understanding to the inner psychological workings of a person or to its true meaning. Often these isolated gestures are postural adjustments to the existing environment...temperature, humidity, people, and one's present internal energy level. In a static position, they often do not convey a deep motivation or message. What is important though, is **how the person arrived at the position.**

Zeke, an African-American man, in his early 20's, had been living at NJL for 1 year. He was very quiet, and smiled a lot. His mother, a school teacher, and father, a bus driver were kind, compassionate, intelligent and articulate people. He was known by his family and friends as a lovable, easy to get along with, slightly introverted guy. As a university journalism major, Zeke changed tracks. He jumped on the locomotive powered by crack.

Crack is highly refined cocaine. It's immediately addictive. It's cheap. It's readily available on the streets. His laid-back engines were now surging ahead, full speed, with no determined destination. It was the crack addict's power-high. He moved with the fast crowd in the secrecy of the city night. His confidence soared, as did his paranoia. He experimented with "coke sex", his heart and brain feverishly racing while engaging in extreme sexual acts with men and women. In this highly stimulated internal environment, his communication, feelings, compassion and interaction with the external, phenomenal world, was cut off. The conscious, emotional bond of relationship with others was broken.

After months of scorching the environment that comprised Zeke's life he was led to NJL. Here, Zeke seemed to be enjoying the many hugs that were freely and willingly given by others in the NJL community. When he shook hands though, his arm extended while his torso pulled away from the other person. He smiled with his jaw tightening up. When asked to do household chores he would give but the slightest verbal acknowledgement. He had difficulty looking others straight into the eyes; his eyes glassing over as his head turned to the side. Zeke's expression in voice and movement was slow. It was difficult discerning if he was carefree or careless about anyone or thing around him. One evening in late September, the community confronted Zeke for not carrying out his agreed upon work duties. He responded with uncontrolled rage and aggression toward the others. As non-violence is a fundamental living principle of the community, a few days later he was asked by the members to leave.

The manner, energy and timing that lead towards a body posture inform the communication. This could be seen in Zeke's non-committed, internally tense, slow movement that expressed itself in alarming outward rage when requested to perform an undesirable action.

At NJL, core, unfiltered, often un-refined, emotionally charged communication electrifies the air bringing all that occupy the surrounding space into an animated present awareness. It's a sense of *kehai*, as Mizuki Shigeru, the famed Japanese ghost *manga* writer described of that "perceptible feeling that proceeds an event."³ These dynamic exchanges force each one to alertly sit up straight and self-reflect. Speaking the truth is paramount. Addicts are accustomed to living off the hors d'oeuvres of lying, deceit and treachery. *Recovering* addicts are encouraged to practice direct speech and eye contact. Sometimes this communication is raw and fresh, and is felt by others as stinging arrows. This is tempered with speaking and listening from the heart. Simplicity in lifestyle encourages working together.

When giving a false impression, the movement is stilted, the merging of gesture into posture is isolated from the other body parts, and a sense of disharmony in whole body movement is present.

³ Toyoshima Mizuho's interview with Mizuki Shigeru, the Japanese ghost *manga* (comic book) writer, *KYOTO JOURNAL*, No.21, 1992. In a later article, in the same issue, transpersonal psychology therapists, Tim McLean and Takaoka Yoshiko define *kehai* as a "energy pool of consciousness with different levels of density, some easier to perceive than others."

Excessive constriction or repression of our spontaneous, natural self's leads to psychic and somatic stress related ailments.⁴ This shows up as a tightened throat musculature, leading to a diminished voice projection, a higher pitch and often an unpleasant resonance or quality of the voice. In the body this manifests as a tighter back, not fully extended arm movements, locked joints as in the ankles, shoulders or knees, along with stiff necks and a tight face. Internally, this is experienced as tiredness, irritability, and oftentimes, clumsy behavior. These symptoms are seen in: rebellious school children whose nature is not to sit for many hours a day in a hard, classroom chair; the independent salaried worker who is following the strict, prescribed management style of her company; the housewife, with soaring wings yet unfolded, who cracks the cup while begrudgingly washing the dishes; or the formerly inspired teacher attempting to employ all of the teaching methods and regulations required by the school.

It's 8 am. The beginning of daily activities is about to begin at NJL. A group of 16 have gathered at Sister Margaret's house. Personal, emotional defense mechanisms are left outside at the door. Hugs go around for everyone. Smiles abound. The communication is gentle and relaxed. All stand and gather in a circle. Many take a deep breath. Arms are placed on shoulders. With eyes closed, together they begin, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."⁵ Peacefully, all take a seat. Some are laughing, some are tired, and others are sitting in quiet expectation. But for now, they have all come together as one; moving, speaking and sharing from the heart; a complex, dynamic, interdependent, living entity finding, knowing and growing love.

This particular linking of gestures and postures created a harmonious group movement sentence. Fear and worries were set aside. A feeling of safety, innocence and joy prevailed. The communication between one another was true, deep and real.

Communication that is understood through our perception of observing movement and form is filtered by the degree of clarity of our mind. That we have the ability to discern variations in meaning is a miracle in itself. Like the different parts of our body communicating with each other, we humans are part of a unified whole of which each aspect is a part of ourselves.

"I am the fly that's eaten by the frog, that's eaten by the snake,
The small girl raped, and the blind raper.
Please call me by my true names,
So I can hear all my cries and all my laughter at once,
So I can see that my joy and my pain are one.
Now it's me with the cold steely gun pushed in my back,
And me whose sweaty finger grips the trigger.
Please call me by my true names.
I am the skinny, bony addict left in the gutter to die,
And the dealer that feeds the addicts' veins with icy cocaine.

⁴ Joseph Heller & William A. Henkin, *BODYWISE*, St. Martin's Press, 1986.

⁵ the *Serenity Prayer* by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, 1943.

Please call me by my true names,
So that I can wake up
And the door of my heart would be left open,
The door of compassion.”⁶

⁶ *True Names* by Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, lines 6 – 10 by Joseph Britton