

Discovering the Self through Drama and Movement

The Sesame Approach

Edited by **Jenny Pearson**

Foreword by **Anthony Stevens**



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CHAPTER 2

Beginning with the Body

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Returning to the sources is stillness, which is the way of nature. (Lao Tzu)

To begin writing a chapter for a book about a subject that is essentially non-verbal is something of a challenge. It is my experience that sometimes words can be an intrusion and may detract from what is actually happening. It is my challenge here, in the beginning, to share some thoughts concerning ways we can begin to look at our movement awareness. I believe it is possible to be more in touch with ourselves and others if we begin with the body.

At birth we are suddenly thrown into a totally different environment with movement and rhythms and some very different sounds. If we are fortunate we will continue to be contained, supported and nourished throughout our childhood and we will have a healthy physical, mental and emotional pattern of growth and development. In this chapter I shall be referring to positive aspects of development rather than exploring the difficulties encountered if the stages of growth are interrupted in some way. I shall begin with a journey with which you, the reader, may be able to identify, or perhaps what you read here may be just the beginning of an awareness that may set up new thoughts on something which is, essentially, fundamental.

As a young, inexperienced and somewhat anxious new mother, I can recall how I often wondered whether my small son was still breathing. As he slept safely in his cot his movements were almost indiscernible. I would sit by him quietly and watch intently until I could sense, and then see, the even, peaceful rhythm of his gentle breath, the rise and fall of his tiny body, the minute movements as he slept, innocently unaware of my concern. I would study his small, curled hands and remember the delight I felt when he was awake. Our hands would meet and he would firmly clasp my extended finger as we

made contact. I observed every movement, savouring each one, and feeling such awe that this tiny human being was so dependent on me.

During his waking hours he was beginning to find a variety of ways to tell me of his needs. Through each facial expression – perhaps just a grimace, a smile, a yawn or a burp – I was able to recognize the meaning of his movement activities and respond to them accordingly. Later, as his eyes focused more easily, he began to explore his environment. He absorbed new sounds, watching and listening. Along with all this, he explored a variety of body movements such as reaching out, withdrawing, pushing, pulling, bending, stretching and rolling. Kicking his small legs into the air seemed to express freedom, pleasure and independence. He discovered that one movement could lead to another and that he could communicate with me by using gesture and mime.

Crossing Boundaries: Infant Mobility Versus Adult Conditioning

We first experience ourselves through movements of the body. Our first reactions to life are in the form of movement. It's amazing to think that children will roll, crawl, stand, walk, run, skip, hop, tumble, turn, jump, race, chase, creep, hover, float, and glide, all without a book of instructions to guide them! Children invent movement games and movement sequences with repeating patterns that involve skipping, hopping and running, rhythm, space, flow and energy. Comfortable in their play, they are at home in their bodies. Their movement is free, confident and uninhibited. They have a strong sense of themselves as they go on to learn the next skill.

Language is developed alongside movement skills: the first sounds that accompany a movement, the first repetitive noises, then words, sentences, phrases. So as we grow and develop, language is an integral part of our natural progression. We use language more and more to survive. To achieve our educational goals and our career prospects, we become dependent on our ability to verbalize our thoughts, ideas and ambitions. We frequently find ourselves being judged by our ability to use words.

So what happens to our movement as we progress into adulthood? It seems that we suddenly find ourselves inhabiting a body that we no longer understand. We come to see our bodies as either fat or thin or comfortable or uncomfortable. The movement spontaneity of our childhood seems to have disappeared. We forget the sheer fun of creative physical play. Our life styles become stressful, hurried and crammed with activities which sap our energy. How can we recapture the expressive use of the body as a means of communicating?

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Nowadays there is much talk and reference to something called 'body language'. What exactly do we understand by this? A simple example may be a woman who is nodding her head at the same time as saying that she doesn't want to leave her husband: her words are saying 'No' but her body is saying 'Yes'. In all walks of life, consideration is now being given to the attitude of the body while we are speaking. People are beginning to look for the tell-tale signs of what the body is saying rather than just listening to what the words are saying. This is a fascinating subject, but many of us can read almost anything we want into the body language of others. Reading body language is a highly specialized skill and can be open to abuse and misinterpretation. Nevertheless, it is true that our bodies may be conveying one meaning and our words another. There is certainly a connection and we do give out signals with our bodies that we are not always aware of.

While we use our bodies daily as a means of completing the necessary tasks in order to live, how many times do we actually stop and become aware of our own physical self? Someone else's physical condition can be, and often is, blatantly obvious. When a friend is tired, ill, happy or sad, we notice the attitude of their body, the quality of their energy. But what do we notice about our own body attitude when we are doing the laundry, rushing to work, writing letters, answering the telephone, meeting the demands and needs of others? We do know when we are tired, busy, 'rushed off our feet', hot or cold: the body tells us and we have a real sense of that physical and mental condition. We also know what it is like to be in a crowd, to sense the quickness of the heartbeat, to shiver with excitement or tremble with fear. We know these body feelings. But the fundamental question is: what do we understand about our physical self? Are we aware of how emotional changes will affect our body feelings? We become expert at managing objects as we cope, but give little thought to managing ourselves.

Most people have experienced some kind of structured physical activity – a sport, perhaps, or dance of some kind. As we learn these skills they become part of us, never forgotten. We know what we are about when involved in our physical recreation hobbies. We sense the feel of the game or the pleasure of sharing the dance. Through movement, we gain a confident sense of ourselves.

Here I am inviting you to think about, if not try out, a different kind of movement experience: a more creative experience which may recapture the playful, spontaneous nature of moving as you did when you were a child – daring to find a way of moving without editing, without following someone else's instructions or rules. This will enable you to listen to your own body

and allow yourself to move into unknown movement and perhaps, eventually, into unknown emotional territory.

The minute we are challenged to move our bodies in an abstract or creative way we become confused, embarrassed, feel stupid, shy and insecure. We may feel overwhelmingly inadequate at using our bodies without language or a set of guidelines, without being given an explanation first, before we move, or being given the opportunity later to give our reasons, to justify our movements. How can we change patterns so long established, change the rhythms, begin to listen and deepen our understanding of our bodies?

There is a vast difference between intellectually understanding the rules and skills of a game or a sporting activity, or even the intricate steps of a folk dance, and the simple awareness of being able to move spontaneously and naturally without the fear and discomfort in the 'not knowing' what the next move is.

Voyage into the Unknown: Breathing

Our breathing patterns are very much affected by our emotional states. The breath will become shallow, tight or fast when we are anxious and stressed. By the same token, our breathing will become deeper and more even when we are relaxed and calm. From the moment we are born, our lives begin to be filled with things we have to cope with. We have to find the resources to use our whole bodies in order to breathe by using our senses. We can no longer draw on the comfort and protection of the womb where we breathe naturally from the belly. As we progress into childhood and adulthood, our breathing moves into the chest and we feel tension in the neck and shoulders. Even in sleeping our minds are unable to be still. We find it difficult to relax and return to the peaceful state that existed in the womb.

Our bodies will always be holding tension somewhere so we need to find ways we can release that. In order to do this we have to take time to listen to our breathing and return to the natural rhythm of our bodies. The following exercises will illustrate some of the very practical ways of experiencing stillness, as we can begin to sense the body in a different way.

Steps to the Pool of Stillness: Exercises

Begin by standing with the feet parallel and apart, to the width of your hips, with the body weight evenly distributed over both feet. The head is balanced lightly on the top of the spine – imagine the lightness of a balloon in order to get the sense of lightness. Let the facial muscles relax and the lower jaw

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drop. The arms hang comfortable and loosely by the sides. Think about the back being wide and open across the shoulders, and wide and open across the lower back. The knees are soft, not locked – comfortable and easy, not turned in. Stand for a few seconds and start sensing how this position is affecting you. Acknowledge those feelings, but remain standing as comfortably as possible. Become aware of your breathing: in what kind of rhythm and in what part or parts is your body moving?

After a few seconds of standing in this way, begin raising the arms very slowly as you breathe in – the arms only need to go to shoulder height. The 'in' breath is perfectly normal and gentle: do not gulp air.

As you breathe out, lower the arms and let the knees bend very slightly until the arms once again become level with the hips, hanging easily by your sides.

Repeat this simple breathing pattern until it begins to feel more natural. Allow yourself to go with the flow of the movement as the arms rise and fall, but it must be a slow and even rhythm – not rushed or hurried in any way.

This simple way of getting in touch with your breathing pattern takes only a few minutes. Another useful way of listening to the body is just to stand completely still in the way suggested above, but without actually moving the arms. This sounds easy but standing still is something quite difficult to do: the body will immediately feel strange and awkward. Our aim will be to return to the deep, natural breathing pattern we had at birth in order to restore our vitality and our sense of the body. Once the movement pattern of the breathing exercise is absorbed, the eyes can remain closed. This will help us to focus and concentrate on the feel of the movement.

Your mind will wander. You will think of a million things you would rather be doing or think that you should be doing. Your body will probably feel strange and uncomfortable. You may feel angry, frustrated, impatient – or you may feel peaceful and calm. You may find that parts of your body begin to ache, or feel strained and uncomfortable. All these feelings and sensations need to be acknowledged as being normal, as one thing becomes clearer. You are beginning to make the connections between body and mind.

This is a first step. By giving some space to yourself and to the body, you may begin to see yourself in a new light.

To explore a little further now, let's take a look at some way we can breathe more naturally. In the beginning I referred to the breathing pattern of a small child: the uninterrupted, even rhythms of natural breathing. How can we recapture this?

RETURNING TO CENTRE

Returning to the comfortable standing position described above, place your hands on your abdomen. Press in slightly as you breathe in, and on the 'out' breath you can feel the belly filling up as your hands move outwards. Quietly and slowly you can breathe in and out this way, concentrating on the 'out' breath in order to avoid tensing up on the 'in' breath.

We will often return to the habitual pattern of our breathing, which tends to be centred in the chest cavity. We can acknowledge this and, after a while, return to the deeper breathing. As we familiarize ourselves with this, we can learn to trust that there is this very simple way which enables us to re-focus, to begin again. By giving space to the body, the body will in turn give space to us.

MOVING OUT

The following suggestions are beginnings for moving in a spontaneous and uninhibited way, for discovering and sensing new body movement qualities. They will also lead to finding new tensions: through exploring and inventing different ways of moving, you will become aware of heightened feelings that will accompany the movements.

Starting with the head, with eyes closed we can experience tiny movements of the neck as if we might be saying 'Yes' or 'No', as if the head is a balloon balanced precariously on top of the spine, we can feel light, float, lift ourselves taller, moving gently – sensing, feeling the weight, power, mobility of the head.

Keeping the eyes closed, allow the head to rest lightly on the top of the spine and begin to be aware of the shoulders. Mentally moving into the shoulders, begin to explore the range of movement in the joints. Very slowly and gently lift the shoulders, lower them, push them forwards and backwards. Raising and lowering, rotating, pulling back and pushing forward slowly, will enable an awareness of the action of the movement.

Continue, with eyes closed, and begin to make simple, small movements of the hands, opening and closing the fingers slowly, quickly, gently, abruptly. Extend your hands away from the body, reaching, recoiling, sensing and feeling the endless variety of movements your hands can make.

You can move on and in the same way explore the range of movements in the hip joints, then in the knees, the ankles and feet, until you have sensed the action of the joints and limbs of your body in a new, untried and unhurried way. Constantly return to an awareness of the breath, finding your own breathing pattern, feeling secure in that constant, even, unhurried rhythm of your own breath.

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This, then, is the beginning. Allowing ourselves the space to be in touch with the body, we gain confidence to move out into the space – to explore, reinvent, recapture some of the natural, spontaneous movements from our childhood. We can change the strengths of the movements: be strong, light, move slowly, quickly, take up a large space with our movements or keep them small and close to us.

We are able to open our body, close it, stop, extend an arm, reach out, focus our eyes on something we may not have noticed before. We move high and low, move forward, backwards, we change direction, change speed. Each time we move, we can sense, feel, listen to the way our bodies are responding to the movements we make and acknowledge some of the feelings that may evolve as we move.

Non-Verbal Expression

The movements evolving from your exploration will be peculiar to you only and may constantly surprise you. Eventually you will have a sense of freedom. If we can give ourselves permission to play again, we can free ourselves with the movement. We find pleasure and enjoyment in discovering again some of the movement exploration we experienced as children. As we feel more comfortable in moving spontaneously we can interact with a partner or with different groups of people. Gradually it will come to feel safe to leave the language of words behind.

As we become more confident and comfortable in using the body in this way, we are able not only to tune in to ourselves but our awareness of others' movement will be heightened. We are then able to respond to the needs of others through a simple movement action – extending an arm, or perhaps mirroring someone else's movement; changing body shape to complement another's body shape, being close or being distant; opening and closing movements. Inventing patterns, rhythms and phrases, we find out the sort of movements that give us pleasure, the kinds of movement that seem difficult. Whatever way we choose to express ourselves through moving the body, the movements belong intrinsically and uniquely to us. We are not judged on the skill or performance. There is no right or wrong way. Creative self-expression comes with body feelings first.

I was recently in a workshop where we were asked to illustrate a social situation by taking up a statue-like group position. We were asked to do this without language, so there were no words to help, no instructions as to how we might show what was happening. There was no right or wrong way to create this sculpture. It soon became very evident that, as we made our body shapes together, we communicated something extremely powerful. We

became immediately aware of group members, we formed a bond in the situation and we understood the problem we were trying to solve – without language. When given the opportunity to verbalize our thoughts and feelings, we found it difficult: the power of movement, even though static, was enough. We went away from the workshop with a depth of feeling about the situation which had come about by beginning with the body action: without trying to put words first, we had an acute awareness of the feelings of each group member.

Can you picture a boardroom scene where the chairman invites the board to dispense with their papers, the table and chairs are pushed back to the edge of the room and everyone is invited to tackle the items on the agenda by exploring solutions to problems through movement first? I wonder if it would work and achieve a faster way of communicating? My own feeling is that, after the initial discomfort of allowing the body to speak, a more rapid understanding would result.

There is a lot more interest these days in approaching problem solving in more creative ways. Courses in communication and presentation skills are being set up nationwide. One of the more recent innovations is a conflict management school. Martial art techniques are deployed as a means of looking at relationship problems: before any language is spoken, participants will perform the movement sequence of a chosen martial art. The dialogue begins with the body action. Although one might immediately think of the martial arts as being aggressive and destructive, they actually have an important philosophical content which goes way beyond combat skills.

For centuries people in China have practised T'ai Chi Chuan. This is often called a soft martial art. It originates from a means of self defence but it has the philosophy of yielding before the attacker. In yielding, the defender turns his or her movements into harmony with, rather than opposition to, the direction of the attacker's force.

T'ai Chi Chuan is a sequence of movements which flow effortlessly. The movements constantly return to a circle. The T'ai Chi symbol, often known as the symbol of the Yin, shows the two great forces of the universe; the dark and the light, held in balance, not opposing, each embracing the other. The teaching of T'ai Chi Chuan has been handed down from generation to generation. I am told, and have read, that you can find hundreds of practitioners in China performing this ancient martial art early in the morning under the trees in the parks, before their working day begins. It is thought to have a profound effect on the well-being of body, mind and spirit. It is essentially an uncomplicated way of beginning with the body. From my own experience of practising T'ai Chi Chuan, it gives a deep sense of *being*,

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far beyond the martial image. This *being* is at the centre of each of us, harmonizing our intellectual, physical and spiritual energies. T'ai Chi Chuan is practised slowly and gently, allowing time for the energy of the body to find a central rhythm, allowing time for the practitioner to return to the body. T'ai Chi is a moving meditation and each movement is perfectly harmonized with the breath; the primeval life force of every being.

I am encouraged that more and more people are becoming aware of the value of using movement as a beginning, as a way into communication and understanding ourselves. I began by saying that words can be an intrusion.

This book contains many words written by a variety of people with rich life experiences: writers who will share their own ways of communicating. We can all work towards a common goal: to liberate the imagination, to free ourselves in order to free others who may be trapped in some way, mentally, physically or emotionally. It is vital that we are able to share the richness of words and language. It is also vital, from time to time, to be able to feel comfortable about working without language. To conclude this chapter, I would like to offer these words: Our body is our self. We cannot run or hide from it, although of course we do and wish to. We strive to be like someone else. We don't dare to look at ourselves. We wear many different masks. By becoming aware of our bodies through movement we are able to slip off the masks and affirm our individuality.

It requires courage and patience to accept our own creative expressive movements as a valid testament of ourselves and to trust that those body statements will not be judged or misinterpreted. We can go on later to discover the meanings of movement, and the analysis of it, which will help us to understand on a different level the difficulties we may encounter when working therapeutically with movement, as a later chapter in this book will show. But if we are intending to use movement as a tool for communication, we have first to understand what it means to us to be able to let go of the language and constant activities of the mind. We block our energy and prevent ourselves from responding non-verbally by seeking verbal explanations and answers to the way we feel. It is my believe that we all had the potential to express ourselves through movement when we were children without thinking about it. Somehow we seem to lose that sense of physical freedom as we move into adulthood.

In the context of working therapeutically with movement, the more we can discover about our own movements the more our capacity for understanding others will deepen. It is difficult to put this understanding into words. A great deal has been written and continues to be explored about body and self, body therapies and the body mind connection. But it is in the

experience of moving creatively for ourselves that we find out exactly what it means to begin with the body. It is an experience that will free the mind and restore the spirit. Sensing and feeling a special movement which belongs uniquely to us will give us a totally new self-awareness that will never be forgotten.

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