

Key Concepts

by Catherine Kettrick

Coordination

Many people who think of "coordination" think of "physical" coordination—a great athlete making a brilliant play, or a ballet dancer leaping into the air. For us, coordination is not simply "physical." It is the sum total of how you are being in any given moment. It is the ability to decide to do something, including *how* you want to do it, and to be able to do what you decided in the way you decided to do it. It is as much, if not more, about "thinking" than it is about "doing."

Thinking

Many people who think of coordination as a "physical" activity think of "thinking" as a "mental" activity. Thinking, however, is an embodied activity. Although you may not be making any large movements when you are sitting in a chair, reading, or working at a desk preparing a report, you are still moving—you breathe, you swallow, you blink your eyes, you make small adjustments as you sit. How does this moving happen? Who decides to shift weight, blink or breathe? You do. That deciding—whether you are aware of it or not—is part of what we call thinking.

Habitual Actions

Some actions, such as breathing, blinking and swallowing, are almost entirely automatic. Although you can consciously decide when and how you breathe or blink, these actions do not need any conscious attention to happen.

Many other actions—shifting your weight in a chair, reaching to pick up your cup, walking—also seem to happen without much conscious attention. If you are like most people, you may be aware of deciding to pick up a book that is across the room, but after deciding you want the book, and beginning the action that will take you to it, you probably don't consciously pay attention to how you are getting there. We walk, as we do most activities, habitually, usually without being consciously aware of how we are walking.

"How" is a Quality

When we talk about "how" a person moves, we mean the quality with which they move. Think of people you know. How do they move? Do they move in a free, easy way? Or do they look tense, or tired, or awkward? Or somewhere in between?

How do you usually move?

"Good" and "Bad" Coordination

Why do some people seem to be "naturally well-coordinated," while others seem awkward and clumsy? Why do we look at some people and say they have "good posture," while others have "bad posture?"

Sometimes people have physiological conditions that affect how they move. They may have cerebral palsy, arthritis, or other neurological or structural conditions which makes it more difficult—but not impossible—for them to change how they move.

Other people, however, who don't have structural conditions, could move more freely, but don't. A person does not wake up in the morning and say, "I think I'll interfere with how I move today, so my moving will be difficult and awkward." Instead, as we grew from an infant to a toddler to a child to an adolescent, to an adult, we at some time began to interfere with our easy movement, usually without consciously knowing that we did.

Why Would We Start Interfering?

There are many reasons. Perhaps we got good grades in school by studying hard, but "studying hard" meant hunching over our books, and gripping our pen tightly as we wrote. Perhaps we learned to play the piano, or some other musical instrument, and made sounds our teacher liked by using extra effort when we played. Or perhaps we had a teacher of music, dance, singing or sports who told us to move in a certain way, and as we tried to do what our teacher wanted, we used more effort than we needed, and our moving became less well-articulated.

Whatever the reason, most of us developed habitual ways of doing activities, ways that often include more effort than is needed.

If We Move Badly, Why Don't We Just Stop Moving Badly and Start Moving Well?

Remember that most of us generally aren't aware how we move. Our moving is habitual. It is the way we always move. Because our way of moving is habitual, it feels "normal" or "natural." What feels normal also feels right. Here's an experiment to try to demonstrate how something can feel right.

Without thinking about it, clasp your hands together. One or the other thumb will be on top. How does that feel? If it is the way you usually clasp your hands, it will feel "normal," "usual," something you are accustomed to.

Now unclasp your hands, and re-clasp them, with the other thumb and fingers on top. How does that feel? For most people it feels "not normal," "awkward" or "uncomfortable," or "wrong."

Clasping your hands in the usual way is like walking, sitting, standing, or doing any activity in your usual way—it feels normal and therefore feels "right." So, even if you know that your usual way of doing activities is "mal-coordinated," it still feels right—or at least it feels like what you are accustomed to. A new way, even one which is "well-coordinated," will feel "not normal" and may feel wrong. So why don't people stop interfering? Because they probably don't know they are interfering in the first place, and because to stop interfering and move in a new way would probably feel wrong. And why would anyone choose to do something that feels wrong?

So How Do I Stop Interfering and Start Moving Well?

Fortunately, the Alexander Technique provides a simple way to learn how to become aware of how you think and how you move, to learn how to stop interfering with how you move any time you choose. It is a simple technique, but requires patience and clear practice. You will have to develop an awareness of your whole self, learning to observe how you move, and how to move in a new way—in other words, to change your thinking.

(For more ideas, see Beginning Experiments).