



New PERSPECTIVES

A Bulletin about Roling and Somatic Awareness

Fall/Winter 1991

The Vital Center of Man

Karlfried Graf Durkheim was a German psychologist and author. He was a major influence on Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, who borrowed Durkheim's phrase "transparent to transcendence" to describe the mythic journey of every life in its unfoldment into spiritual realization. Campbell calls Durkheim a "polestar."

*In his book, **Hara, the Vital Center of Man**, from which this article is excerpted, Durkheim explains the ancient philosophies and techniques of Zen masters which he learned in Japan with its emphasis on inner calm and balance, on empirical learning and the cultivation of tranquility and self-knowledge through the perfection of arts such as painting and archery.*

*My own development as a Rolfer has been greatly influenced by Durkheim's book. **Hara** is a precise and eloquent testament to the essential role the structural integration of the body plays in an individual's growth into full maturity and self-realization.*

*The illustrations in this issue are from the books **Emotional Anatomy and Embodying Experience** by Stanley Keleman, illustrated by Vincent Perez, and **Body Therapy** by William S. Leigh. —David Laden, ed.*

"'Chest out—belly in' . . . a nation capable of taking this injunction as a general rule is in great danger,' said a Japanese to me in 1938. It was during my first visit to Japan. I did not understand this sentence then. Today I know it is true, and why.

'Chest out—belly in' is the shortest formula for expressing an attitude which is wrong in principle, to be more precise, a wrong bodily attitude which prompts and fixes a wrong mental attitude. What does this mean? That a man should stand or sit bent over or stooped or slumped together? Certainly not, but straight and erect. 'Chest out—belly in,' however, leads to a posture which just misses the natural structure of the human body. Where the center of gravity shifts upward to the chest, the middle of the body is gainsaid and constricted, and the natural alternation of tension and relaxation is replaced by a wrong one which forces a man to swing between hypertension and slackness.

But how can this become a 'danger to the nation?'

Because this wrong posture both expresses and consolidates a false ordering of the inner forces which



The Overbound Response

The Underbound Response

prevents their true order, for where everything is drawn upward there is no right centering. But is not the heart the natural center of man? And is not man the being destined either to lift himself heavenwards

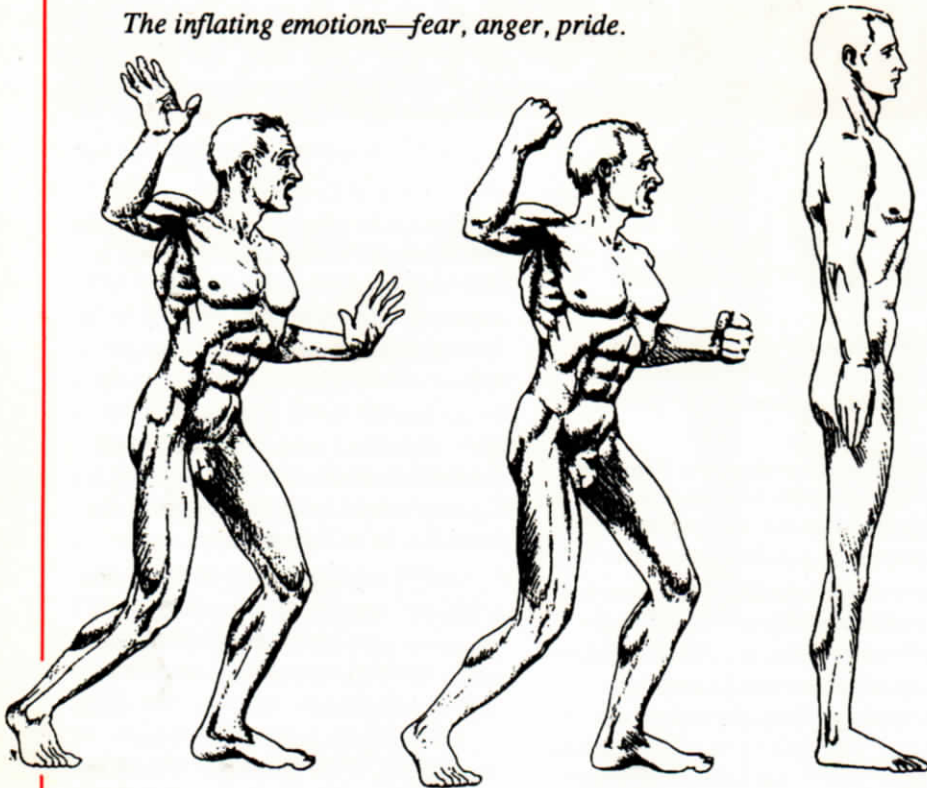
and to master his life with his 'head' and 'will,' or failing this, to accept and endure it with his heart? Certainly he is. But right mastery and the strength to endure will be achieved only when the forces located in the upper part of his body and their center, the ego, operate not independently and separately but are constantly held in check and guided by those that lie at a deeper level.

Man, as a living being, is not rooted in himself. Rather, he is nourished, sustained and held in order by Nature whose laws operate without his knowledge and assistance. Man sets himself in opposition to the order of life which sustains him if, by an unnatural shifting of his center of gravity, he denies that vital center in his bearing which testifies to this order.

Intellect, will and emotion, the powers of head, chest and heart with which man as a conscious being has been endowed will prove his undoing if, caught in the net of his concepts, in the brilliance of his achievements and in the web of his entanglements he forgets his anchorage in the weaving and working of the Greater Life. Just as the growth and unfolding of the crown of a tree depends directly on its root-system, so also the vital development of man's spirit depends on his being true to his roots, that is, to an uninterrupted contact with the primal unity of Life, from which human life also springs. If, forgetting this, man diminishes the realm of this primal life by artificially pulling himself upwards physically, he disturbs the balance of his natural forces, and the inflated *I* then bars access to that higher development which is its real function to prepare, protect and serve.

The ego as the center of our natural consciousness can serve the true meaning of all human life only if instead of posing as master, it remains the servant of the Greater Life. Where 'chest out—

The inflating emotions—fear, anger, pride.



belly in' is the maxim the little ego ascends the throne and it is this arrogant assumption of the I which is 'the danger to the nation.' Fundamentally we in the West are also aware of the danger, as the East has been since time immemorial. But the East, never having been as cut off from contact with the basic vital center as we are, and being more perceptive than we, is still able to hear its warning voice at times when emotion, intellect or will endanger the contact with the primordial source of Life. The East heeds its warning to man ever to remember his origins, knows the secret of how to regain contact with it when temporarily it is lost, and obeys the command not to lose contact with it as consciousness increases—in fact, to cherish it then more than ever. Only thus can man consciously become more and more what, as mere nature and unconsciously, he already is: a child of the all-embracing divine unity of Life wherein his own life is rooted, and in which unconsciously and with longing he is constantly seeking his true center whenever, as an intellectually developed being, he has debarred himself from it. The Japanese term Hara means nothing other than the physical embodiment of the original Life center in man.

Man is originally endowed and invested with Hara. But when, as a rational being, he loses what is embodied in Hara it becomes his *task* to regain it. To rediscover the unity concealed in the contradictions through which he perceives life intellectually is the nerve of his existence. As a rational being he feels himself suspended between the opposite poles of heaven and earth, spirit and nature. This means first the dichotomy of unconscious nature and of the mind which urges him to ever-increasing consciousness; and second, the dichotomy of his time-space reality on this earth and the Divine beyond time and space. Man's whole existence is influenced by the tormenting tension of these opposites and so he is forever in search of a life-form in which this tension will be resolved.

What is man to do when he feels himself suspended between two opposing poles? He can surrender himself to the one or to the other and so, for a time disavow the contradiction; or he can seek a third way in which it will be resolved. The only right choice is the one which will not endanger the wholeness of his being. Since man in his wholeness must include both poles, his

salvation lies only in choosing the way which unifies them. For man is destined to manifest anew the unity of life within all the contradictions of his existence. The way to this unity is long. The integration of these two poles—the unconscious, and the conscious life of the mind, as well as between life in space time reality and the Reality beyond space time—constitutes the way to human maturity. Maturity is that condition in which man reaps the fruit of the union he has regained. The realization of this union means that he has found his true vital center.

When we speak of the state of an individual we mean something that concerns him in his entirety, that is, something that transcends the duality of body and soul. But because man is a unity of body and soul—the body being the outward form of the soul and the soul the inner import of the body—the structure of the whole individual is necessarily made apparent and legible in the form and order of his body. There is no psychic structure and no inner tension which is not reflected in the body. Hence the discovery of the inner psychological center implies also the discovery of the physical center.

But where is the center of the body? In the region of the navel, or, to be precise, a little below the navel. Therefore it should not surprise us that Hara, the essence of the vital center literally translated means belly. That the physical center of gravity of a man who has found his equilibrium should be located in his belly sounds strange to European ears.

In his living outward form man revolves constantly round an inherent ideal image of a right relationship to heaven

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and earth, to the world and to himself. This image is always struggling for realization. But man's actual condition at any given moment corresponds only roughly to this image. When it corresponds to it fully then he is 'in order' which means:

- 1) His physical appearance, if right, corresponds to his pre-destined position between heaven and earth. His upright posture shows that he is directed upwards and held downwards. It expresses clearly and harmoniously that man is both rooted in the earth and related to heaven, supported by the earth and at the same time striving heavenwards.
- 2) If the living form corresponds to the correct relationship with the world, with humanity, with objects and with Nature, it indicates that he is closed as well as open to the world, clearly set off from it yet in contact with it, withheld and yet open. As a living form rightly oriented he breathes the world in, as it were, and breathes himself out into it.
- 3) When the outward form shows man's right relationship with himself he appears both held and released, self-contained yet animated by a living dynamism, tensed and relaxed in a right alternation and balance.

Thus we can see how people offend against the harmonious relationship between heaven and earth either by straining and stretching upwards or sagging downwards. In the latter case we get an impression of inertia or of downward pressure instead of that of a living support from the earth. What should be support then registers as an oppressive heaviness as though the figure were glued to the ground. Such a man does not walk he drags himself; he does not sit, he slumps; he does not stand, he just fails to collapse.

If the form errs in the opposite, the upward direction, the figure appears to strain upwards in a way that negates its vital relation to the earth. Such a man walks, stands or sits firmly, but bobs up and down as if denying his natural weight. He does not straighten up naturally but twists up and thus very often he appears cramped, conceited or 'up in the air.'

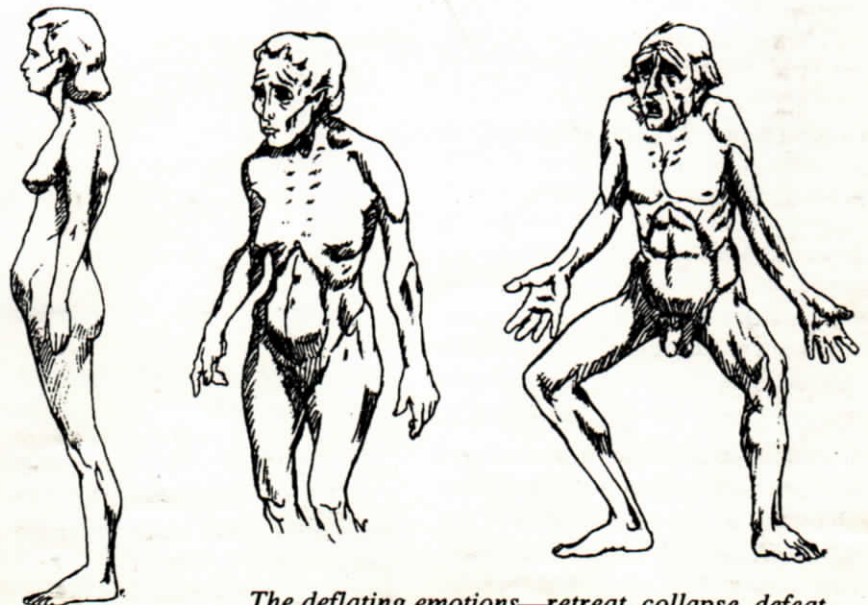
In both these cases the right centre of gravity—the one connecting the upper and the lower—is lacking. When it is present the energies pointing to heaven and those affirming the earth meet in harmony. What is above is supported from below. What is below has a natural upward tendency. The figure grows upwards from below as the crown of a tree rises from a vertical trunk deeply rooted. Thus the right posture expresses man's Yes to his bi-polar wholeness, his place between heaven and earth.

Similarly lack of right relationship to the world is shown in the case of the man who does not admit the world, who shuts himself off from it or who, on the other hand, yields to it helplessly. In the first instance he appears not shut, but shut out, his features like those of a clay figure are not alive but rigid, inert, showing no contact with anything. His reserve is not due to easy, natural detachment but to a rigid and guarded aloofness. The whole person gives the impression of being sustained by no living breath, of being lifeless. It does not vibrate in a vital interchange of I and You, does not breathe in a rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, of yielding and withholding, of admitting and flowing out. The capacity to open to the world is obviously lacking.

A totally different picture is present in the case where there is no reserve at all. The movements of such a person

reveal a helpless abandon to the world which, as it were, threatens to swallow him. Nothing from within holds the figure together, there is no strength for detachment and resistance, it seems to dissolve and drift into its surroundings, and gives the impression of melting. A person of this kind moves as if he had no bones in his body, as if he had nothing holding him in one piece. There is no delineation and none of that detachment which is the sign of self-reliance and self-collectedness.

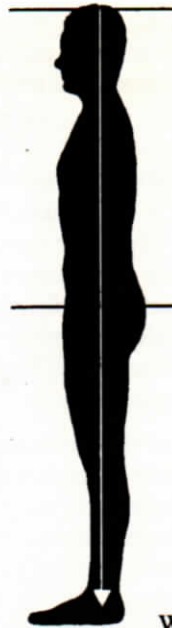
In both these cases the root center producing the right state of the body is what is missing—that center which makes possible a right independence and right contact between the self and the world. The relation to the world for which man was destined shows itself in a balanced tension between the two poles. Self and world must be able to function independently of each other and yet be related and connected. They must separate in order to find and unite with each other again, and become one in order that each may find itself. Thus right relationship to the world is shown only when the motions of yielding, of making contact and of admitting in no way suggest helpless self-surrender. The man at home in himself, that is the rightly centered man, lives in that undisturbed state where the eternal out and in of breathing goes on peacefully, in which he gives himself to the world



The deflating emotions—retreat, collapse, defeat.

without losing himself in it, abides there awhile without being swallowed by it, withdraws himself without thereby cutting himself off from it and remains alone without ever hardening himself.

Man's right relationship to himself is lost where in the interplay of inner life and outer form a disparity appears, either as an excess of the driving force of life or as an exaggerated reserve and self-protection. There are people whose bodily aspect conveys the impression that their inner life is so overflowing that their inner form is quite lost. Such people seem shapeless, without inner order and direction. Their gestures are loose, unrestrained and not co-ordinated. In the opposite fault the living flow of movement is lacking. The gestures are inhibited and halting and in repose the figure appears folded in on itself. One feels no consolidated core from which movement radiates outwards, and the whole figure seems to be bundled together by force of will, and perpetually in danger of breaking up and falling apart. Excessive rightness is then replaced by formlessness so it can be said that the indwelling life-force is stronger than its containing vessel, cramps the living core and crushes it like heavy armor. In both these cases what is lacking is the active center which can either withhold or release and in which the conflict between outer form and inner life must ultimately be resolved.



*Balance
around a
vertical axis*

When this center functions rightly the whole impression is one of evident harmony with inner life. The inner and the outer exist not against but for each other. The visible form seems neither forced nor slack, neither dissolving nor rigid, but just what it is, maintaining itself yet constantly adapting—in short, alive. From moment to moment, the inner life fulfills itself in a consistent outer form and conversely this form renews itself constantly from within. At every moment the outer appearance is the expression of a renewal of life, re-animating the whole again and again.

Always then the presence of the basic vital center is expressed in the

easy equilibrium of the two poles and if one dominates over the other the result is a wrong relation to heaven and earth, to the world and to the self.

Just as failure to achieve the right center always implies a disturbance of the living whole so the achievement of it demonstrates nothing less than that state in which the *whole* is kept alive in the right tension between the two poles.

When that center is lacking a man falls from one extreme into the other. The hunched up sooner or later collapses. The slack type every now and again rears up in exaggerated self-assertion. The man without center either strongly rejects the world or weakly abandons himself to it and he who is in conflict with himself swings between inner disintegration and complete rigidity.

This center of gravity which reveals the overall inner attitude of man constitutes the expression of a third element. What is this third element? Nothing less than the whole man—to be more exact, the man whose living wholeness manifests the perfect integration of his essential being and his life pattern.

Hara, understood as the right functioning of the vital center, is the prerequisite and proof of the life-form of an individual who, in his psychophysical totality corresponds to the right relationship 'heaven and earth' to the world and to himself.

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