



Integration in Manner of Use

Back to Beginnings in the Technique: The Evolution of BPP

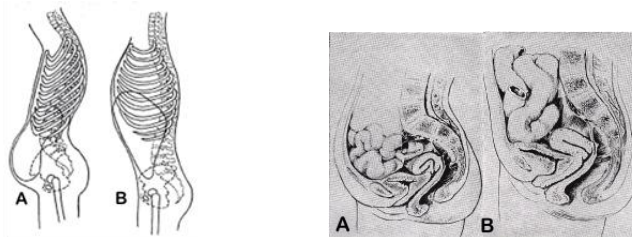
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In *The Posturality of the Person* (PoP), Chapter 7, I've treated extensively the What, the Why, and the How, but only briefly the Whence, of *Breath as Postural Process*[™]. This I now undertake, both because the elaboration of its sources should clarify aspects of the process itself, and also because its improbable beginning and progress may have an intrinsic historical interest.

It was at the beginning of 1985, living and teaching in NYC, four years out of training at ACAT-NY, and going through a failed marriage in which I had staked much, that I decided to finish a doctorate in music lacking only dissertation that I had abandoned fifteen years before—somewhat as a diversion, I confess, but also as a Self-affirming act of closure. Being now¹⁹⁸⁵ an ex-professional clarinetist—I was formerly Principal Clarinet with The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra—as well as a current Alexander teacher, the dissertation hurdle became feasible with a combination of the two, and so I proceeded to the necessities of enrolling in the Music Education Department at Teachers College-Columbia University (TC)—founded, incidentally, by John Dewey. Not to belabor that toilsome three years, I eventually produced *Musical Performance and Respiratory Function in Wind Instrumentalists: Effects of the Alexander Technique of Musculoskeletal Education* and got my Ed.D. degree in May 1987. It was in the necessary research on respiratory function for the dissertation that I encountered the materials that formed the basis of BPP.

In the main, these materials were 1) the book *Essentials of Body Mechanics in Health and Disease* by J. E. Goldthwait, M.D., and three other orthopedists at the Massachusetts General Hospital; and 2) papers by physiologist A. De Troyer, "Mechanical Action of the Abdominal Muscles" and "Actions of the Respiratory Muscles or How the Chest Wall Moves in Upright Man." Additionally, in my anatomical explorations of training days, I had acquired I. A. Kapandji's Vol. III *The Trunk and the Vertebral Column* of his three-volume *The Physiology of the Joints*, which had extensive coverage of respiratory anatomy and physiology among much else (see citations in PoP, pp. 22, 83-84, for these works).

I no longer remember the trail that led me to Goldthwait but definitely remember taking it out of the TC Library and poring over its content, the possible effects of poor *body mechanics*—their clinical characterization of posture—on all the body's major systems. I realized that here was a medical analysis of the very things we Alexander teachers were dealing with in terms of "poor use," things that Alexander went on about endlessly in his writings, but only as a lay person, medically speaking. (Available in reprint, every Alexander teacher should own this book.) Goldthwait and his colleagues were particularly concerned with the negative bodily impact of *visceroptosis*—"dropped viscera"—and their therapeutic approach, through conventional exercises, was to restore tone to the abdominal musculature so as to reposition the viscera "back and up" in the torso. Their illustrations made it abundantly clear why this needed to happen:



The De Troyer papers came to me through Dr. John H. M. Austin, M.D., a pulmonologist-radiologist, amateur musician, and long-time Alexander student of Pearl Ausubel in NYC. In the early 80's Pearl and John had collaborated on a pilot study on the effects of Alexander study and respiratory function, using John's position at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center for access to clinical respiratory testing to quantify the study's outcome variables. So with John's faculty status at

TC-Columbia owing to his hospital appointment, his interest in Alexander research, and our shared musical proclivities and abilities, I was able to enlist him as a member of my dissertation committee—a match "made in heaven"—resulting in many Friday evening dinners at our local Szechuan restaurant planning the research; the De Troyer papers John found through a search of the relevant literature and passed on to me.

Getting back to Goldthwait, the illustrations made clear the *what* of corrective changes that should happen; the *how* of these changes was the book's crucial insight, that of the "two abdomens." As the authors put it (p. 271):

The most important muscles in the teaching of good body mechanics are the abdominal group. It should be noted that these muscles have two separate nerve supplies. The muscles below the umbilicus therefore can be contracted independently from those above it; the patient must be taught to use them properly, that is, from the lower attachment upward. The control of the abdominal muscles and the ability to use them, whether lying, sitting or standing, are the foundation of this work. ... *The aim is to teach good habits for daily use, not hard muscular effort* [italics added].

This information came as total revelation to me, having had previously no clue that such a thing was possible, but at this point I didn't try to "do" it; it simply got filed away in the "knowledge drawer."

And getting back to De Troyer, which I was studying in parallel with Goldthwait and other sources, his papers together illuminate the relations among the abdominal musculature, the abdominal contents (viscera), and the respiratory musculature, principally the diaphragm. The critical insight here was that the ability of the diaphragm to lift the ribs was directly related to the position of the viscera in holding the diaphragm relatively high, so that its fibers attached around the lower ribs were functionally long enough to exert effective force. To quote:

The abdominal contents thus provide the solid [i.e., hydraulically non-compressible] fulcrum through which the diaphragmatic insertions on the ribs operate to lift the lower ribs and expand the rib cage. And the more effective the abdominal fulcrum is, the greater the insertional force developed by the contracting diaphragm to lift the lower ribs.

Who knows when, in the process of study and reflection, a crucial moment of insight occurs such that things theretofore separate come into inevitable and inseverable relationship? At that point for me, somewhere in late 1985 I think, and relative to my studies, I realized that Goldthwait was telling me to activate my lower abdominals "back and up," and De Troyer was saying that when the viscera are held up against the diaphragm, the ribs move. And then I saw that Goldthwait amounted to a kind of postural stasis, just "holding on," but that De Troyer showed how the holding on down low resulted in the movement—the lifting—of the rib cage up above. And so the light dawned and the path opened conceptually for the necessary experiential testing of what I had thus far unexpectedly apprehended. Somewhere in this mix, I recalled reading something Alexander had said early on: "In the process of *creating* [his italics] a co-ordination, one psycho-physical factor provides a position of rigidity by means of which the moving parts are held to the mode in which their function is carried on" (*MSI*, Centerline Press ed., p. 60). Hmm—support down low, movement above: the game was indeed afoot!

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So one day I'm at home in my Upper West Side studio apartment, undressed to my briefs, looking at myself in my teaching mirror. Based on what I had learned, I thought that I should be able to hold in below my belly button as I breathed in, at the same time not holding onto my upper belly. At first I couldn't do that at all—as a clarinetist I had been taught to breathe in by pushing my belly out, so doing essentially the opposite was "a challenge." But I persisted (as Alexander said of his own process) and after awhile was mostly successful in doing what I intended. I can still remember vividly my amazement when I *saw* in the mirror what happened when I did "the thing." My chest filled out and *my ribs moved*. And it was all coming from the *inside*, not by any external movement. I was moving my ribs by holding on, down low, to my belly! And so what was to become BPP was validated in direct, visible experience, definitely new ground for me.

Without yet connecting it explicitly to Alexander's breath teaching, I was convinced that I was onto something pretty significant, and proceeded both to practice it in myself (not automatic by any means) and to consider how I might present it to my colleagues at ACAT-NY, where I was serving on the training faculty. (A propos, one day at the Center,

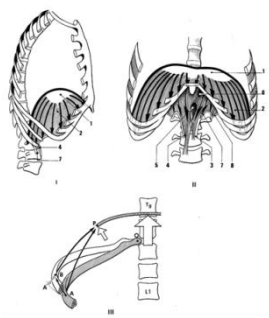
after several months of this solitary practice, Judy Leibowitz remarked to me, "Ron, you're looking much fuller in the chest"! It was during these ruminations that I realized that this approach to the breath would require not only experience, as in the usual hands-on guidance, but also understanding, because the necessary coordination was internal rather than external, and thereby not accessible for direct hands-on, as in stand-sit, monkey, or other conventional procedures. Thinking on what was actually involved in the process, and realizing that the specific coordination involved was a radical change in the conception, for many if not most people, of both posture and breath, I decided on "Breath as Postural Process"—it seemed then and remains now as descriptively accurate as words alone can be.

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I was recently able to recover files from an Atari computer (64k RAM!) that I was using from 1985-88, and one of them was an invitation, dated November 8, 1988, to the ACAT faculty to attend a workshop in "Breath as Postural Process":

Dear Colleague, As I mentioned at the general faculty meeting on October 2nd, I would like to present my work on breathing, which began in its current phase just about four years ago, to all of you. I have come to feel that cultivation of the breath is central to the Alexander process, both as a result of my own experience and as reinforced by FMA's many references throughout his writings. In any case, I would like to acquaint you with my findings, since I have already presented this material to two training groups and feel that you should have the opportunity to give me feedback.

This was to be a three-hour (!) presentation with about half devoted to the "understanding" part and the rest to that of "experience." By then of course I knew the what-why-how of BPP for myself, but organizing this psycho-physical knowledge for others, or even one other, was another matter—call it the fine and difficult art of teaching. I found what I needed in the previously-mentioned book of Kapandji, which colleague Troup Matthews characterized as "... an anatomy text which is notable for its expressively aesthetic illustrations of movement on the one hand, and the clear engineering interpretations of joint structure and muscular vectors on the other." On pp. 138-151 is a series of illustrations and explanatory texts of the anatomy, movements, and forces of the thorax that allowed a progressive presentation of the material, especially so with the live commentary that I provided. This diagram in particular, once translated mentally into the three spatial dimensions plus the one of time—definite brain work, mind you—was the key to understanding how the diaphragm lifts the rib cage over the fulcrum of the viscera as stabilized by lower abdominal support:



But I admit that it is for many who study it to be somewhat of a *pons asinorum* ("asses bridge")—a hard problem, theory or formula difficult to grasp—as FMA put it in *The Use of the Self* regarding the initial failure of his inhibition at the critical moment. As Alexander folk we're much more accustomed to kinesthetic rather than to visual information, and to feeling than to analytical thinking—the learning process is very different. My experience with students, however, is that mystery gradually yields to understanding through active dialogue with me, which is a major reason that I insist on personal interaction before certification.

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My career as BPP protagonist was thus launched and continued in 1990 with a presentation at the Third International Congress in Engelberg, Switzerland, and two years later at the 1992 NASTAT AGM in Chicago. At Engelberg, a prominent teacher suggested that perhaps he would invite me to his training program in Australia to give it (didn't happen), but after Chicago, an American trainee censured me in writing to NASTAT for rampant "end-gaining" in an obviously natural

function that worked on its own thanks to Primary Control. Definitely mixed reviews! In any case, the Engelberg presentation led to an unexpected and crucial development, namely, Jeroen Staring's treatment of it in his *The First 43 Years of the Life of F. Mathias Alexander, Vols. 1 and 2* (self-published, 1996).

Context is here needed for Netherlander Staring, a complicated denizen of our Alexandrian firmament. Without doubt one of the most knowledgeable persons in the world —perhaps *the* most—about the documentary history of the Technique, his initial encounter with it was at an Indian ashram in 1979. As he tells it, there he had an experience in the form of an "Alexander massage" from a fellow ashram-er, and, captivated by the unexpected sensation of lightness, had more Alexander lessons from a Dutch teacher beginning in 1986. But his very strong intellectuality moved him additionally to delve into the history and *modus operandi* of this thing he was doing. Who was this Alexander anyway, and what the rational basis of this technique that was taught in his name? And so Staring began his quest, aided and abetted by the advent of the Internet, which put the books, pamphlets, articles, letters-to-the-editor, photographs, illustrations, and other dusty sources—both primary and secondary—he sought, literally at his fingertips.

Now comes the unfortunate, for us Alexandrians, outcome of his labors: discovering in particular Alexander's unqualified racial statements, his apparent embrace at some level of eugenics, his alleged plagiarism, and his many quasi-medical claims—Staring's wife was a medical doctor—this impassioned inquiry into the origins of the Technique became a consistent and persistent diatribe against it and its founder, in the forms of a two-volume self-published biography, a massive doctoral dissertation, and numerous articles in the scholarly press. Although he has never disclosed any motivation for his animus other than the ones cited above, he directs his pique especially to what he calls the "fetishization" of Alexander by un-critical teachers and followers, from the first right down to the present. And so the paradox of his work is that on the one hand it is a peerless trove of historical and contextual information about Alexander and the Technique, while on the other it is relentlessly biased against its subject, as I wrote in an open letter to him published in *NASTAT News* ca. 1998.

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That said, regarding BPP I am in his debt, and that also requires explanation. Sometime in the mid-90's I got notice of the availability through private subscription of Volume I of Staring's book mentioned above, and I ordered it from him. In a lengthy note dated March 30, 1996, on the flyleaf he wrote, "Although pp. 279-281 I speak about you as a "fetishizing Alexander teacher your BPP method is only 1 millimeter short of real understanding." In a later communication he added, "... I do acknowledge that BPP is the closest to Alexander's 1907 method I have seen." In the pages cited above, he was discussing the origins in various sources of a breathing technique known as "the diaphragmatic press," which, because of its similarity in physical description, he concluded was essentially that of Alexander as given in his 1907 pamphlet *The Theory and Practice of a New Method of Respiratory Re-Education*. Citing the account of my presentation at Engelberg as published in *The Congress Papers* of 1992, and also my references to Goldthwait, Spalteholz (anatomy), and Kapandji, Staring said, "It may be interesting to know that Dennis is director of the Alexander Technique of Atlanta training course It is obvious that Dennis was never taught anything about Alexander's breathing method while he was an Alexander Technique student. Dennis had to *re-invent* [sic] the *diaphragmatic press* [sic] before he understood Alexander's 1907 pamphlet." *And that is absolutely true*. Staring continued, "... it is obvious that Dennis still does not understand that his '*Breath as Postural Process (BPP)*,' or '*lengthening breath*,' method *is* [sic] Alexander's breathing method."

It is also true that, in my written introduction to the Engelberg and subsequent presentations, I had said, "I would like to emphasize at this point that these and other observations of Alexander [from FMA, 1907]], which in my previous readings had had virtually no meaning for me, became perfectly clear once I experienced in myself the specific co-ordination and movements of BPP." But at the time I was thinking more in terms of BPP's *consistency* with 1907, rather than its *identity*, as Staring was saying. This realization came later for me, I can't say exactly when, the certainty that Alexander 1907 and BPP are essentially equivalent. It would seem that at the time I was so smarting over being called a "fetishizing Alexander teacher" that I was quite deaf to what was actually being said about BPP; in my emotional reaction I took it all in as criticism—understandably perhaps, given Staring's pointed brusqueness of style—rather than as a veritable compliment, in substance if not intention!

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The years ca. 2000-2015 were ones of relative inactivity BPP-wise in terms of active promotion, although I did continue my personal practice of it unabated and ever more convinced of its value. But life-wise I was heavily involved in tango and considerably so in AmSAT politics; I was also having a generally comfortable time in Atlanta with my wife and tango partner Dr. Solange (Zouzou) Bonnet, who taught French at Georgia State University. Somewhere along the line I did give one more AmSAT ACGM presentation, but the fact that I no longer remember where or when suggests that the response likewise was basically indifferent—interest? yeah, sort-of; action? no thanks. In any case, over these years my principal Alexander activity, aside from teaching of course, was writing, an effort that eventually produced two books, *The Posturality of the Person: A Guide to Postural Education and Therapy* in 2013, and, a year later, *Alexander Revisited: Contemplation and Criticism 1979-2014*.

A digression on my writing.

From the outset of my Alexander career in 1979 I had felt moved to write about the Technique, and over the years had produced many pieces that were originally published in *NASTAT News* and *AmSAT Journal*. A collection of these, together with selections from *Atlanta Alexander News* (a promotional newsletter that I put out on moving here in 1990), abstracts of my dissertation and of my published research paper on balance in older women, plus material from other sources, formed the main content of *Revisited*. (Editorially I will here just comment that the six articles—one by a critic—of the "Conceptual Foundations" section of that book are as rigorous discussions of the theoretical-practical assumptions of the Technique as can be found anywhere in the literature.)

But it is *The Posturality of the Person* that is germane to present interest. The motivation to write it arose ca. 2012, when I was beginning to feel the combined influence of 75 years of living and 32 of teaching, relative to setting down my considered, and in some respects controversial, views—for posterity, as they say. Thus I sat with my word-processor and listened inwardly—took dictation, as it were—to what I had said, over and over again, to my students over the years. Of course the technical aspects of the book involved much more than that, but that was surely the inspirational part of it. I realized that here, if anywhere, was where I needed to make the case for BPP—the what, the why, and the how of it—so that's what I did in Chapter 7. As I said there, "Truth be told, you would need to look long and hard to find a source equal in both scope and brevity to that you are about to read—a veritable Martini, concentrated and powerful, of respiratory lore." I'm pleased to say now that the effort has been rewarded in terms of favorable reception, particularly that of aspirants to BPP certification, for whom it is the principal "users' manual."

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Then in 2015 everything changed with the passing of Zouzou, after a brutal two-year battle with Stage 4 Ovarian. Needing to find new involvements, in July of that year I contacted AT Teacher Claire Rechnitzer, whom I had met through my writing a few years earlier and who had generously and eloquently provided the "General Introduction" to *Revisited*, about giving a conventional (non-BPP) Alexander workshop for the numerous Cincinnati group. This took place favorably, such that the next year I was able to give a BPP-specific presentation there. Although not fully realizing it at the time, this was the ground-zero of my current efforts to promote BPP, because Claire, in reading my book and taking the workshop, had become a true believer (in the best sense) and is now an active lieutenant in the certification work as well as, in September 2025, becoming the third certificatee herself.

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During this period I was also aware of the growth in the Technique of Carl Stough's "Breathing Coordination" as interpreted and promoted by AmSAT Teacher Jessica Wolf. Actually no surprise in a sense, it's understandable enough that, due to the sheer lack in the Technique of *something* to offer in substantive breath work, her "Art of Breathing" has come in to take up the slack. And Wolf has been its resourceful and articulate advocate, as evidenced by the many AT teachers who have embraced it. But the Stough/Wolf approach to breath is not Alexander's, not at least as evidenced by their respective writings. As far as I was concerned, granted the appeal and availability of Stough/Wolf, we now had in

the teaching of Alexander via BPP an authentically viable method of breath work, one that I had somewhat unwittingly "re-invented" (Staring), and that should also come to stand absolutely accepted in the Technique. But, I confess, at this time I still wasn't contemplating an active path forward for BPP.

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Thus my state of mind during the Pandemic years, when doing much of anything, besides trying to stay well, was moot. But in 2019, feeling increasingly my years and the near-certain fate of BPP without any action on my part, I did produce what at the time I thought was probably the swan song for it, "The Theory and Practice of Alexander's Breathing Method" (*AmSat Journal*, No. 15 Summer 2019), the first sentence of which was, "My purpose in this article is to restore to our work the method of breathing that Alexander (FMA) advocated from the beginning of his career, when his focus was almost entirely on it, styling himself professionally as a 'Specialist in Respiration,' and sometimes known by his pupils as 'The Breathing Man.'" In thus for the first time officially and unequivocally "coming out" for the essential equivalence of BPP and FMA, the stage was set for the next and crucial development.

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The restrictive conditions of the Pandemic having eased beginning in 2023, in 2024 AmSAT decided to hold in Salt Lake City its first in-person ACGM in five years, and I decided to offer a multi-topic workshop called "Three Essential Coordinations for Optimal Posturality." Based on my long teaching experience with aspects of Use that are little addressed in the Technique, the first was "Ballistic Walking and the Human Bicycle," the second "Lumbar-Pelvic Rhythm and Swayback," and the third "A Tale of Two Abdomens and the Optimal Lengthening Breath." I had no idea what the response would be to this offering—past experience was not encouraging—so I was really surprised that 14 people showed up, and that they seemed really interested in what I was doing. Mara Sokolsky, long-time AT teacher and one of the participants, wrote me afterwards, "I looked around at the other participants, all wildly engaged, staring intently at the volunteer who was under Ron's hands." She also said, "Thinking about my 'two abdomens' [BPP] has been a game changer. When I clue in and find my upper one, it feels like my training directors have their hands on me, even several decades later." Well, at that point I saw with exquisite clarity and relief that the message had finally reached someone who both needed it and "got" it—on the spot as it were—and my thinking was something like, "If an Alexander teacher of such long experience as Mara's can find BPP a game changer, there surely must be others as well." And that was the beginning of the process leading to my decision formally to establish a certification for BPP. It was actually a few months later that I woke up in the middle of the night realizing that that was exactly what I needed to do, not only for my profession but also for my own legacy, at age 87 no longer a dim possibility but a hard reality. I didn't want Breath as Postural Process to die with me, as Alexander's "New Method of Respiratory Re-Education" had apparently with him.

One of the workshop participants was Spencer Chandler of Edina, MN, a late-term trainee of Brian McCullough's course in Minneapolis. He was obviously older than the others, perhaps 40 or so. He also had seemed especially receptive to the work as it unfolded in class, so early in 2025 I contacted him, proposing that he become the first BPP certificatee by doing the necessary prerequisite study and coming to Atlanta for six contact hours of training. To this he agreed and I'm delighted to say that he did so successfully and has become, with Claire, a capable and trusted associate in developing the program.

I do regret not starting this work 20 or even 30 years ago; the practice and theory were in place, lacking only vision and energy for propelling them forward. Evidently I was assuming, like many intellectuals, that if only a truth is spoken, people will listen and respond. Alas, ain't necessarily so, as History bears ample witness. On the other hand, working in this way, at the eleventh hour as it were, lends an aura of urgency and derring-do to the task that is not unwelcome for a gentleman of my years. I feel blessed that BPP's early comers as recognized herein are ready and willing to cultivate the conditions that will allow for its progress in the coming years according to its merits as vigorously advocated. As I said in another place, "The table is set and the meal laid; we are invited to partake, and thereby to become *Alexandrians in Full*."