

Making Sense of Uprightness

By Bonnie and William RiverBento

When we understand incarnation as an ongoing process of childhood rather than merely as a physical event at birth, we extend our responsibility as adults beyond parenthood. All the early childhood caregivers and teachers become involved in the child's incarnation. This fact complicates the incarnation process, but also provides hidden resources and opportunities for the child. Our modern day challenge is to educate ourselves to a process that, in times of old was a natural unfolding, but which is under attack today from many directions.

In the first few months of life the infant is completely dependent upon others for its mobility in space. Although the hands and feet are capable of movement, they do not have sufficient strength to move the torso any measurable distance. This dependency wanes in the third and fourth months and the infant "plays" into moving her own body through a steady progression of movements, which culminate in crawling and exploring the world around her.

The child, while lying on her back in the horizontal plane, extends her hands above her, and they wave and reach upward, becoming perpendicular to the body. The limbs lead the child toward uprightness. If the child is allowed sufficient time on her back, she will develop the torso muscles needed for stability in the upright position and will be able to bear her own weight. The whole process of turning oneself over to face the earth and then coming to the upright on earth is a vital step in ego development. Through these intricate movements, the child comes to touch the self and to touch the earth in right relationship. Stability of torso, stability in the soul, stability in the vessel which receives the essential and unique human being, these are the gifts of these first movements through the dimensions of space. Uprightness is a miraculous achievement for the child, yet it is also the beginning of a new set of challenges. The geography of the body and orientation to space needs to be learned. The acquisition of these skills involves a delicate interplay between the body in movement and the senses.

The sense of well-being, which is an organic sense of life functions, helps to establish a healthy relationship to the earthly planes. In and through the head the outer world enters through the portals of the senses. The head is the highest part of our organism, and the air we breathe, the light we receive, the food we eat can all be seen as nourishment, which enters from above and descends down into the body. When this is functioning healthily, the nutrients give to the limbs the power to move in space.

Watch the little child toddle through space to grasp hold of something in the world around him. In his ego-being he seeks to grasp the world, to begin his own digestion of the world around him. When we examine digestive processes from a phenomenological viewpoint, we cannot help but marvel at the journey of all that is to be digested. In eating, the food must be lifted, moved horizontally, tumbled through all the planes as we chew, and then it descends. Follow it through the interior spaces. It goes on a similar journey to that of objects that come into the grasp of the toddler.

Now imagine a child grasping a hold of a fake plastic rock. It looks like granite, has the appearance of being heavy, yet as he grasps it, his hand flies into the air, for every fibre of his body was prepared for the weight! He is shocked and learns not to trust his senses. Can we draw an analogy to the body and digestion? Does the body know when it is being fooled? Is food that is chemically altered grasped as truthful by the digestion? Trust in the truthfulness of the world around and within is gained during this time of childhood. The concept of "rock" is true when the child touches it, and he is secure in his thinking about the forces of earth. A sense of security in conceptual ability is based in healthy digestion.

Now let us watch the toddler as she moves into the world around her. Her rocking and shuffling movements gradually articulate into the cross lateral and balanced weight shifting movements of human walking. Through rocking back and forth, the weight and balance is shifted over the saggital midline. The child experiences left and right and gradually the center, from which the limbs will move freely. This outer movement is reflected in human statements such as, "On one hand, I see it this way, while on the other, it is thus." These statements reveal a higher nature to thinking of concepts. Through a healthy development of movement, the child develops the language of clear articulation of concepts.

As the child's walk becomes refined, the child gains a sense of mastery in his balance. The sense of balance is not a static phenomenon but a dynamic one, which mature in the child when a genuine ability to come to a state of rest is achieved. This sense is deeply connected to the frontal plane; both front and backspaces are involved. Although most of our senses are oriented to the front space, we also have a mysterious backspace. Without it we could easily be drawn into every sense impression that meets us from the world; in the backspace we have a counter-weight to this pull into the world around us. We can in both a physical and a metaphoric sense turn our back to the world and listen to our own response to it.

Consider the agitated, restless child, who moves incessantly and finds no peace in inward "listening". These children, growing in number, and often labeled as having an attention related disorder, are revealing a disturbing psychological profile. They tend to exhibit mistrust of the world around them, a lack of true autonomy, and an inability to sustain initiative in a task that is not of strictly personal interest.

While doing Attention Related Disorders studies, Bonnie very often finds that these children have a history of early childhood ear infections. These are accompanied by rounds of antibiotics and all sorts of interventions such as tubes in the ears. These children have experienced a very real disturbance in their ability to come to true balance and in their ability to learn to listen. When we journey past the middle ear and into the inner ear, we see two wondrous "organs", the vestibular apparatus and the cochlear formation, joined together at the "vestibule" by the major exiting cranial nerve, the vestibular nerve. The impulses, which travel down this nerve, serve to inform us regarding the sound we hear and the space we occupy. In a concerted way, they serve to establish the human ability to maintain balance and hearing. Thus we see that balance and hearing work together intimately. In order not to just "fall into" something, we need to listen and discriminate well.

To protect and guide the great deeds the child must accomplish, those of coming to uprightness, grasping the world, and coming to restful listening, we need to gird ourselves with a deep understanding of these forces. With such understanding, we protect children from the very forces that threaten to rob them of these incarnating rites of passage.

Consider the forces that tug at parents to place their child into an apparatus that will "give" the child an upright experience and that inhibits the ability to grasp the world and dampens the child's sense of peace and listening. This powerful tug must be met with a joyful loving knowing of the child's bill of rights, which could begin with, "every child is endowed with the right to playfully and freely explore being in a body and in the space around him; and through an experience of truth in his surroundings, he will come to trust the world and sense his holy and autonomous self, living in a temple of stability and restful listening."

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