

## The Kinaesthetic Sense

In the section on the balance of the head, I touched on the importance of our ability to sense the position of the head relative to the rest of the body. This ability is not confined to monitoring the head but extends throughout the body – specialised nerve endings<sup>1</sup> provide us constantly with sensory information concerning position, movement, weight and effort. This amounts to an extra sense, as tangible as any of the five conventional senses.<sup>2</sup>

We need this sixth sense, the **kinaesthetic sense**,<sup>3</sup> in order to perform the simplest tasks – sensing weight and thereby regulating the effort involved in lifting, knowing where our fingers are when touch-typing or playing a musical instrument, walking around our own houses in the dark, holding a child’s hand firmly yet gently, “testing” a foothold when hiking, and singing in tune are all specific kinaesthetic skills which most of us take, more or less, for granted.

However, the kinaesthetic sense is also deeply involved in a more general monitoring of our balance, maintenance of posture and muscle tone, the sense of our own weight, and, ultimately, the sense of our own substance – our feeling of presence in and juxtaposition to our environment.

Thus the kinaesthetic sense is not merely a sort of corporeal tape measure; it is, without exaggeration, our “sense of self” – a major component of our self identity.<sup>4</sup>

The simple fact that culturally we do not count the kinaesthetic amongst our senses should perhaps alert us to the existence of a problem. The problem is this: as the way in which we coordinate ourselves habitually inevitably comes to “feel normal”, we lose the “calibration” of our kinaesthetic sense and thereby become physiologically incapable of “feeling our way out” of our poor postural coordination; the direction in which we need to progress is not one we would consider, for example, in answer to the question, “What would sitting properly feel like?” In this sense we cannot trust what we feel to be a reliable representation of reality – Alexander teachers delight in the moment when a student, experiencing an improved state of postural coordination, is brought face to face with her distorted kinaesthesia and observes, normally with a big smile, “That feels *so weird*.”

The retraining of the kinaesthetic sense undertaken in the study of the Alexander Technique can perhaps be understood by analogy with another specialist sense training – the training of the musical ear.

A young musician, asked to write down, for example, the tenor line as she listens to a JS Bach chorale,<sup>5</sup> might justifiably feel somewhat out of her depth. However, with intelligent non-endgaining teaching and practice, she will begin to find such an exercise more and more possible until there is no doubt that what she perceives is a detailed, transparent and reliable representation of the music being sung.

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1 Principally: *Muscle spindles* in muscles, *Golgi tendon organs* in tendons, and *Pacinian corpuscles* in joint membranes and ligaments.

2 See David Garlick’s book, *The Lost Sixth Sense*, 1990.

3 Kinaesthesia (Greek: *movement + sensation*). Proprioception (Latin: *received from the self*) combines kinaesthetic sensory information with that from the inner ear and, according to some authorities, the eyes. The two words are often used almost synonymously.

4 See Oliver Sack’s book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, 1985, Chapter 3 “The Disembodied Lady”.

5 A lot can be learned from this sort of exercise about the futility of “trying”.