

"to come to our senses, both literally and metaphorically... we first need to return to the body, the locus within which the biological sense and what we call the mind arise. The body is a place we mostly ignore; we may barely inhabit it at all, never mind attending to and honoring it...coming to our senses is the work...of being present and awake here and now."



Such words are music to the ear of any Bioenergetic therapist! Bioenergetic Analysis was one of the first somatic or body-oriented psychotherapies and was developed by Alexander Lowen, MD in the early 1950's [Lowen died October 28, 2008 at his home; he was 98.] Avant-garde in its perspective, it advocated the necessity of integrating bodywork into the psychotherapy process and proposed that lasting change occurs as one resolves the energetic disruptions structured in the body and experiences a new way of being in the world. In more recent years, therapists who work with trauma survivors have come around to this same insight, and body-oriented approaches and techniques are becoming more mainstream.

In a classic Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown is walking dejectedly, dragging his feet, all slumped over, barely breathing and explains, "This is my depressed stance...When you're depressed it makes a lot of difference how you stand...The worst thing you can do is straighten up and hold your head high because then you'll start to feel better..." He concludes, "If you're going to get any joy out of being depressed, you've got to stand like this," and he slumps even more.

Lowen loved that cartoon when I showed it him. Years earlier, he'd written, "... it is almost impossible for a depressed person to lift himself out of his depression by thinking positive thoughts. This is because his energy level is depressed. When his energy level is raised through deep breathing and the release of feeling, the person comes out of the depressed state...How much energy one has and how one uses his energy determine how one responds to life situations. Obviously, one can cope more effectively if one has more energy..."

Of course, a person cannot lift themselves out of depression by doing a few expressive exercises or going to the gym. When the depression is mild or moderate, however, significant gains can be experienced by attending to the energetics of emotional states, exercising and actively engaging the body in the therapeutic process.

Bioenergetic therapy is a way of understanding who we are in terms of body motility and aliveness, and understanding how and why particular somatic structures and chronic tensions develop and then restrict energy. What Charlie Brown was discovering, Bioenergetic therapists work with every day: how to alter a person's experience by addressing how body structure and carriage effects one's energy and thus one's mood, thinking and outlook on life.

Most people associate Bioenergetics with expressive exercises like hitting a pillow to vent anger. That's one kind of expressive exercise, but Bioenergetics consists of a broad repertoire of interventions with stretching, breathing and expressive exercises. The art of Bioenergetics is assessing what the client needs therapeutically and then modifying or individualizing the exercises. Each exercise has a different objective — ranging from those designed to help contain overwhelming emotions to those designed to express pent-up emotions, from those that focus on defining boundaries and limits to those that focus on becoming more receptive and soft hearted, from those that project "no" to those that affirm "yes," etc.

One of my favorite Kudzu comics is a drawing of two men sitting on a log on a lazy afternoon waiting for the fish to bite. One says to the other, "Have you ever had an out-of-body experience?" After a long pause, and without looking up, his buddy answers, "Nah, I'm still waiting for an in-body experience."

Many people share that yearning. While the phrase "body language" is bandied about in the media and in self-help books, most people have little idea what the body is communicating, how to read its messages and, even less, how to create a positive, alive connection with their body.

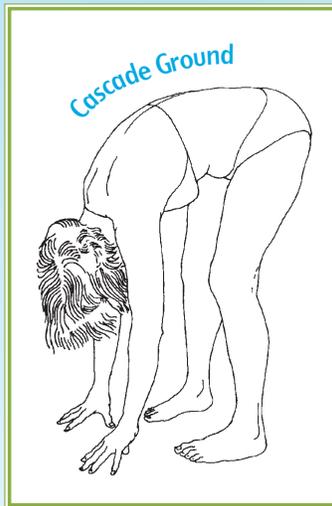
The blossoming interest in mindfulness techniques that teach awareness of feeling states and body sensations is both an example of such a yearning and a means to developing a positive, bodily connection with ourselves. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leading teacher of mindfulness writes:

In and of themselves, the exercises will not resolve emotional or psychological problems; their fundamental purpose is to enhance body awareness and increase energetic charge. In the introduction to his book *The Way to Vibrant Health*, Lowen writes, "...they are exercises, not skills, and much depends on what you put into them. If you do them mechanically, you will get little out of them. If you do them compulsively, their value will diminish. If you do them competitively, you will prove nothing. However, if you do them with care for and interest in your body, the benefits will astonish you."

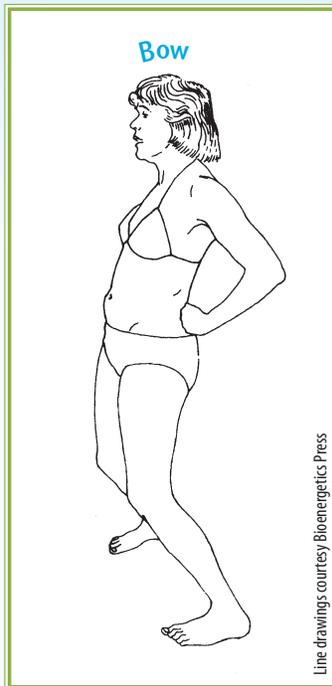
Feeling well grounded is necessary if one wants to be more energized in a centered, balanced and secure way. This makes both physical and emotional sense. For example, we speak of someone who is well grounded emotionally as being able to "stand on his or her own two feet" or being "down to earth." Embodying that with very specific attention to foot, knee and gravity positions enables one to increase their sense of security and standing as well as their energy.

Read through the following descriptions of a 4-part exercise with attention to the details, which can help you practice the positions with care and interest in your felt-experience.

1. Cascade Ground: Stand with feet slightly pigeon-toed and about 10 inches apart. Be sure that the knees are bent and the center of gravity is over the balls of your feet. Then slowly bend forward at the waist as much as you can, letting your arms dangle freely with your fingers touching the floor only for balance. Let your head also dangle freely relaxing the neck as much as possible. Remember to let your legs support you, keeping your knees bent (not locked straight) and the center of gravity over the balls of your feet, heels slightly lifted. As you exhale, let tensions roll off your back. It is helpful to think of this position as a waterfall where the legs are secure, strong cliffs, and the upper body is like water cascading forward washing away burdens. You may experience some quivering energy vibrations in your legs as tensions release and energy begins to circulate. Hold this position for 3 to 5 minutes, and then rise up slowly vertebrae by vertebrae.



2. Bow: Stand with feet slightly pigeon-toed inward and about 20 inches apart. Again, be sure that the knees are bent and the center of gravity is over the balls of your feet. Then place two fists against your lower back just below the waist to support your lower back and gently push your pelvis and hips forward as you arch your torso backwards. Your body from knees to collar bone is now arched in the shape of an archer's wooden bow. Next — and this is important — keep your head level so that you are looking straight out in front of yourself not up towards the ceiling. It's helpful to think of energy arrows shooting straight out from your eyes directly in front of you. The tautness of the bow's string is how closely you draw your elbows towards each other behind your back. Breath deep into your belly. As you hold this difficult position, you may experience energy vibrations shaking up through your torso.



Line drawings courtesy Bioenergetics Press

3. Cascade Ground: Repeat the grounding position after doing the Bow. It's important after doing any backwards-arching exercise to then release any strain by bending forward in the Grounding position. The vibrations in your legs may be stronger this time and may now flow up into your pelvis and along your back as energy moves and invigorates.

4. Rooted Tree: As you rise up from the grounding position, let your knees remain bent and keep the center of gravity over the balls of your feet. In this simple, yet balanced position, let your elbows bend and raise your hands open and wide like branches of a tree. What's so wondrous about a well-rooted tree is its capacity to be both flexible and strong, to sway with the wind and yet remain balanced and centered. Connecting with that idea can help you feel well-aligned, tall and secure. You may experience a kind of humming vibratory energy as you breath rhythmically down into the belly.

A long time ago, I received a greeting card by Stine. On the front, there were two trees with lush green leaves and sturdy trunks; one had a bird sitting on a branch. Next, a strong wind was blowing across the page tilting both trees. In the final scene, the wind had calmed to a breeze, but only the tree with the bird was still standing. The inscription read: "On the surface things can look very much alike. But then looks can be deceptive." Upon second glance, one sees what the bird knew: the roots of the fallen tree were shallow but the roots of the standing, gracefully swaying tree were deep.

Having an in-body experience that enables one to feel more grounded, centered and alive is the goal of Bioenergetic Analysis and the root of a graceful relationship with oneself.