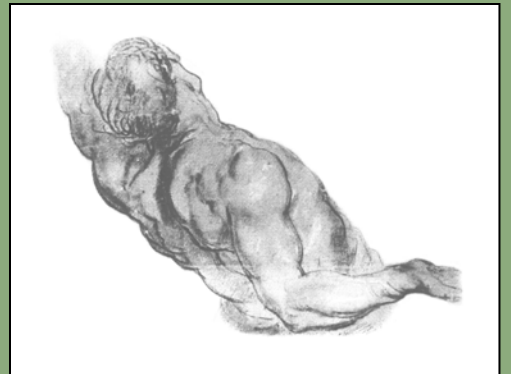


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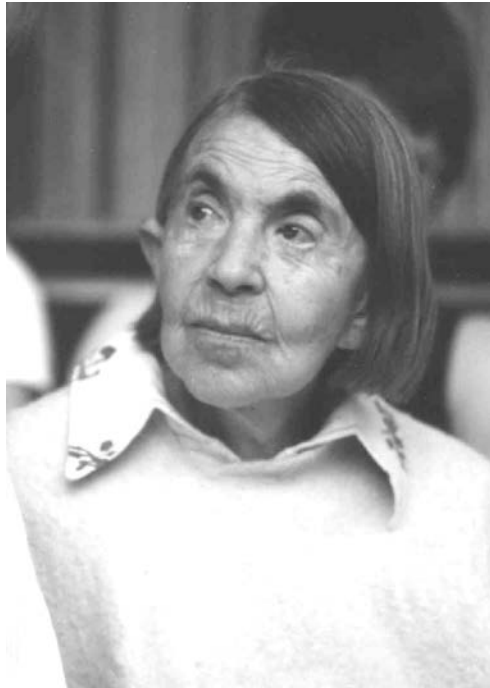


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Charlotte Selver

Born April 4, 1901 – Ruhrort, Germany
Emigrated to United States - 1938
Died August 22, 2003 – Muir Beach, California

“Becoming more and more able to be there in situations, whether easy or difficult; to be more there with our mind, with our hearts, with our sensitivities, with our strengths - this is very, very important.”

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USABP Mission Statement

The USABP believes that integration of the body and mind is essential to effective psychotherapy, and to that end, its mission is to develop and advance the art, science, and practice of body psychotherapy in a professional, ethical, and caring manner in order to promote the health and welfare of humanity.
(revised October 1999)

Gymnastik for Busy People

Elsa Gindler

Translated from the German, Die Gymnastik des Berufsmenschen, originally published in 1926 in Gymnastik, the Journal of the Deutscher Gymnastik-Bund (German Gymnastik Association)

Reprinted from: Elsa Gindler, Volume 1 (1978), with permission of the Sensory Awareness Foundation, Mill Valley, CA (www.sensoryawareness.org).

Abstract

The author writes about consciousness in the simple, ordinary activities of life such as standing, sitting, and working to awaken an understanding of what happens in them. Breath is a major focus, as is relaxation, tension, and gravity, to help people understand more fully their own constitution in order to learn how to take care of themselves. This article, written early in her work, is the only piece she published and all that was not burned when her studio was destroyed in the final months of World War II.

Keywords

Movements – Relaxation – Breathing – Gravity

It is difficult for me to speak about **Gymnastik** because the aim of my work is not the learning of certain movements, but rather the achievement of concentration. Only by means of concentration can we attain the full functioning of the physical apparatus in relation to mental and spiritual life. We therefore advise our students from the very first lesson that our work must be pursued consciously; it can only be entered into and understood through consciousness.

Now it becomes ever more and more apparent to all of us that we do not quite keep up with our lives – that the balance of physical, spiritual and intellectual forces is disturbed. In most cases this disturbance already begins to happen in the school years. Then, beyond the problems of school and puberty, problems in family relationships and profession – and perhaps misfortune – bring us difficulties with which we can no longer cope. We no longer lead our lives thoughtfully and sensitively. We become rushed and allow confusions around and within us to accumulate in such a way that they get the upper hand at very inappropriate moments.

Inadequacy dominates us in general and in particular. Daily there are the same, small, endless, infinitely important mishaps. In the morning we are not rested and therefore get up just that much too late to permit ourselves to take care of our body with the calmness and quickness which would fill us with well-being and vigor. It is not without reason that we say, “I must bathe, I must brush my teeth (drink coffee, go to the theater, a party, etc.)” instead of, “I am going to brush my teeth, etc.” These expressions reveal something important – that we do everything in order to be finished with it, and then the next thing that must be done comes along. If a room is cleaned for the purposes of getting through with it, it looks different from the room that has been cleaned with the sense of having it clean and orderly. And how extraordinary: the success is so much greater with the latter yet no more time is needed. On the contrary, we become able to reduce the time for a task while substantially increasing the quality of the results.

We also come into a state that is more human because, when a task is executed thoughtfully, and when we are contented with ourselves in the doing, we experience consciousness. By that I mean consciousness that is centered, reacts to the environment and can think and feel. I deliberately avoid defining this consciousness as soul, psyche, mind, feeling, subconsciousness, individuality, or even the “body-soul.” For me, the small word “I” summarizes all this. And I always advise my students to replace my words with their own (those words which they use in talking to themselves) in order to avoid getting a knot in their psyche and having to philosophize for hours about what was really meant. In that same time they could be doing something useful.

It may be regarded as somewhat presumptuous to wish to approach the attainment of consciousness by means of *Gymnastik*. And it really is! We are always embarrassed when this work is called *Gymnastik*. Most people have become accustomed to regard *Gymnastik* as certain exercises, so the first question put to us is always about our “typical exercises.” To this we can only reply that our work is not *Gymnastik* in the ordinary sense, which certainly does not bring about consciousness: what does is the mind that is present and concentrated on situation.

In general people think, “When I have learned the relaxation exercises I am relaxed; if I can do the breathing exercises I can breathe; when I do the swinging exercises I work with *elan*; and when I have learned how to correct bow-legs or knock-knees, they will be straight.” This is not true, and we invariably see failure resulting from this naive opinion.

It is clear that merely learning and doing these *Gymnastik* exercises cannot lead to the attainment of full consciousness. How do we get closer to that? Simply by using all our spirit and feeling in bringing our body closer to be a responsive instrument for living. We see to it that our students do not learn an exercise; rather, the *Gymnastik* are a means by which we attempt to increase intelligence. When we breathe, we do not learn fixed exercises, rather, exercises are the means of our getting acquainted with the workings of our lungs, either through inducing or releasing holdings. When we become aware that our shoulder-girdle is not in a position where it works easily we do not put it into the correct position from without. That

does not really help anything, for as soon as the person is busy with something else he forgets his shoulder-girdle. Admittedly these are people who can clench and hold it in just the “right” place, but then that’s just what it looks like – like clenching.

Usually we start a course by asking our students what they want to work on. In the beginning the result is shocking. Either nobody says anything, or somebody says, “You should get rid of my stomach,” and other similar requests. The first stumbling block is when I answer that I would not think of getting rid of someone else’s stomach; the person would have to do that for himself.

Let us assume it has been decided to work on the shoulder girdle. We carefully examine it as to detail of form and usage. With the help of a skeleton we find out how it can best fulfill its function. We compare our functioning with that of the skeleton and then work to find out what has to happen within ourselves to come closer to such functioning.

In most instances, and especially during the beginning sessions, we work blindfolded so that each person is trying, by himself, to determine from where the holding of a wrong position originates, and what hinders the shoulder-girdle from finding the right position. Suddenly, each student is working in his own fashion. That means that each one in the class works differently, with a pervading concentration and quiet that would be envied in many lecture halls.

The leader notices at once where something goes amiss. He sees, for instance, how some students have a talent for always choosing the most difficult and problematic tasks. It is the business of the leader to point out that one reaches an objective by using the simplest and easiest experiments. In each course, however, we work with completely different exercises, inventing new ones as it goes along.

In this manner we accomplish something essential. The student begins to feel that he is in charge of himself. He suddenly feels that if he wishes he can work on his whole body in the same manner that he worked on his shoulder-girdle. His consciousness of self is heightened, he is no longer confused by the range of the subject matter, and he is encouraged. This is a state, which cannot be attained by exercises alone, regardless of how thought-out they may be.

So much for our way of working. Now to the areas of learning, which are breathing, relaxation, and tension – words often misused as are all beautiful things in the world. As long as they remain just words, they create mischief; as soon as they are imbued with experience they become great mediators of life.

One of the most delicate and difficult areas of our work is breathing. As we can see among small children and animals, every movement can increase and deepen breathing. Among adults, however, whose physical, spiritual, and mental processes are no longer governed by the unity of consciousness, the relationship between breathing and movement is disturbed. And almost all of us are in this situation. Regardless of whether we want to speak, make a small movement, or think, we impede breathing. Even while resting we impede it. We need only to consider how freely the neck emerges from the trunk of most animals, and, in a quiet moment, compare our own neck to theirs. Usually we will find that our neck is being pulled considerably inward from the middle of the body, approximately from the diaphragm. When this interconnection is observed for a longer time, it will be noticed that this cramping is quite arbitrary and that when one lets it go, one suddenly feels that the neck can be held much more freely. The constriction in the airstream through the neck (that occurs in almost everyone) suddenly ceases, and one feels much freer. At any time when this can be consciously permitted one feels not only that movements will not disturb the breathing, but can increasingly deepen it. Instead of becoming tired, one becomes refreshed by work. If this were translated to living, we would become more and more refreshed and productive the more demands are made upon us.

Actually, we imagine life to be that way, and we see over and over again that people who accomplish the most are fresher than those who do nothing. And if we observe successful people we can often see that they display a wonderful flexibility in reacting, in constantly changing from activity to rest. They have flexible breathing, or functional breathing. This is not easily attainable. Our students repeatedly confirm with little satisfaction that they need only think of an activity to feel how they immediately become rigid and impede their innate capacities. One is so used to doing it that it is difficult to abandon this nonsense.

In difficult situations – for example in marital quarrels or with the unexpected appearance of one’s employer – we see that this gasping for breath and cramp in the diaphragm and stomach regions assumes frightening dimensions. Breathing stops, or a breath is hastily drawn, and the situation – which probably demands our greatest responsiveness – is hopelessly lost. We all know this condition well: embarrassment, anxiety, ill humor, confusion in the mental and spiritual realms; trembling or an embarrassed fidgeting with arms and legs in the physical realm. If one is already conscious of how cramping – or constriction – can be eliminated by becoming aware of it, one is suddenly equal to the situation. The breath flows more freely, the mental confusion abates, one can make use of one’s capacities.

It is clear that we cannot begin by working with large movements if even the smallest cause interference with the natural flow of breathing. One must first come to know – through observing oneself – just what one does with breathing while brushing one’s teeth, while putting on one’s socks, or while eating. So we begin by attempting to waken in our students an understanding of what happens in these daily performances. Then we have them try to make any movement without interfering with breathing. This requires so much work that one could probably stay with it forever. The main playground for this practice, however, is not the class session – there the release of constricted breathing is attained relatively easily and quickly. It is in life outside the classroom where we must notice how breathing becomes constricted in response to the most trivial causes; it is there where the tendency to constriction must be overcome. Simply noticing the constriction already brings help, and the oftener we notice it, and the more we accustom ourselves to investigating whether it is not perhaps an interference with breathing, the more easily and naturally it will be relieved. Small happenings allow us more time to do this than the big ones, but in any case we will begin to feel the beneficial effects as soon as breathing is released, noticing that

rigidity immediately vanishes. It is this, which we have to experience; how at the moment natural breathing is permitted we get the feeling of life. In addition, constricted breathing is closely related to unhealthy physical tension; we can never reach physical ease if the activity of breathing is not simultaneously freed of all constriction.

We must recognize and sense the connection between breathing and bodily movement, and bring about their correlation. In doing so we begin to understand that the demands made upon us by life are not so overwhelmingly difficult, that they can be carried out with greater economy of strength, without our usual maximum effort and turmoil.

Holding one's breath during exhalation is one of the more familiar interferences with breathing. Its counterpart frequently occurs during inhalation, manifesting itself as a kind of sucking in of air. Good undisturbed breathing happens involuntarily. We can, however, influence breathing willfully, thereby modifying it and diverting it from its natural course. This occurs when we do not wait for inhalation to be stimulated on its own through physical impulse, and when we do not permit exhalation to occur completely.

If one wishes to carry breathing all the way to completion, it is necessary to be able to carry through the four phases of breathing: inhalation, pause, exhalation, and pause. These pauses and the conscious feeling of them are of the greatest importance. The pause, or rest, after exhalation must not be lifeless. It should never be a matter of holding the breath. On the contrary, it should most closely resemble the pause we experience in music – which is the vital preparation for what is to follow. It is wonderful to see how inhalation emerges from this living pause. There is an opening of the cells: the air enters easily and silently and we feel fresh and toned up.

What happens, though, if we do not wait until the lungs have opened up? And when do we wait for it? Immediately after exhalation, we often take in air arbitrarily and try to pump the lungs full of air before they ask for it. This is utterly inappropriate. We soon feel how the course of air in the lungs falters, and there occurs a thick feeling around the breastbone, the air is dammed up in the large bronchi and there is pressure and closure in the small ones. The air does not and cannot enter the lungs freely because the small lung vesicles have not yet opened. And it is these that must be supplied with oxygen while breathing. Access to them, the smallest bronchia, is provided by vessels more delicate than hair, so naturally the attempt to press the dammed-up air into them must fail. In addition, it often occurs that the air vesicles, at the time when the air is prematurely pumped in, have not yet emptied themselves of the old supply of air. They now do that, and the air stream trying to work upward and outward from inside collides with the air being pumped in from the outside so that there occurs a kind of piling up, and the result is a pressed, constricted feeling. But if we wait for the opening of the smallest vesicles we thereby permit a pause to occur completely. Then, as soon as the vesicles become empty, they suck in air automatically. The air then easily penetrates the smallest, hair-fine vessels. Nowhere does congestion occur and nowhere is there a sensation of thickness or of lack of air. We do not need to bring into action any special activity for inhalation.

This is the difference between the breathing that occurs when the lungs and vesicles are open and breathing, which occurs through the arbitrary inhalation of air. The difference for movement is very significant. If movement is undertaken during arbitrary breathing – i.e., while air is being pumped in – it will not be alive and will get no feeling of movement. If the movement occurs with open breathing, the movement becomes alive.

For releasing people from constrictions, only those movements can be fruitful which are connected with conscious and spontaneous breathing or, to state it more specifically, with breathing which happens through open vessels. Anything else would be more likely to disturb the collaboration between breathing and movement and to increase the habit of excessive and inappropriate effort. This is an additional reason compelling us to carefully assess any movements to be used in releasing constriction. For example, it makes running, for which much inhalation of air is necessary, seem unsuitable. The tendency is to pull in air-which does not help supply the lungs with air, nor assist in eliminating the deficiency of oxygen resulting from running. If we practice running in our work, we start by doing so for such a short time that we can run with open breathing, then gradually increase the time.

An adequate supply of air is necessary and helpful in every task. It is not possible to swim or even float quietly without the ability to provide the lungs with air. In jumping, the jump succeeds quite differently, and even its form is different, if one has prepared oneself through “opening” for it. One can see this also among animals. Cats prepare for their leaps; no ladybug or bird flies up without making itself light through filling up with air. We can gradually come close to this if we observe ourselves continually in daily life, preferably on minor occasions. Thinking about it, alone, will not bring us a step closer. We must just open our senses to these phenomena.

When the student has learned to react with breathing to the small stimuli, and has come to improved functioning of the lungs, a new task emerges spontaneously – that of bringing the entire lungs to more working. Almost all of us use only a small part of the lungs in breathing. If this small part functions well, as has been described, we can accomplish much in life. However, in our work it is clearly shown, that, if we engage the full capacity of the lungs in working, we can increase our efficiency significantly. And here begins the education in exhalation. It must take place without pressure, it must be elastic, it must be like the gentlest breeze, and it must bring about the greatest possible emptying.

In the course of these considerations we have often used the word “constriction” or “cramping” and must go into this topic in greater detail. I have tried to show to what a great extent constriction is bound up with disturbances in breathing and these, once again, with disturbances in the psychic realm. Releasings, or relaxations, are hence utterly dependent upon our being able to create a living image of the state of relaxation and of realizing it through suitable exercises.

For us relaxation is that condition in which we have the greatest capacity of reacting. It is a stillness within us, a readiness to respond appropriately to any stimulus. We read that the Arabs have a capacity through which, after long hours of trekking through the desert, they can lie motionless on the sand for ten minutes, and in this ten minutes to regenerate

themselves so that they are then able to continue walking for hours longer. This is an example of relaxation. We hear that top businessmen often remain utterly motionless for a moment while directing all their senses inward. Then, suddenly, they seem to awaken and make decisions that are uniquely right. It is clear that in this moment of being in themselves relaxation has taken place. This is the kind of relaxation we are seeking. It can be most readily reached through the experience of gravity.

It is gravity, which our limbs must learn to feel and understand. Indeed, every cell in us must once again become able to respond to gravity. Who of us, for instance, is truly relaxed as we lie in bed before going to sleep – responding to gravity, as does a sleeping animal? When we attempt to feel the weight everywhere in the body, even in the head, we get into a state where nature takes over the work for us. To the extent that we can come to a way of lying in which this state is possible, natural breathing will occur – not arbitrary breathing with great movements of the chest, but a quiet breathing where the breath flows imperceptibly back and forth and brings sleep.

As for standing – real standing – we must feel how we give our weight, pound for pound, onto the earth, and how in doing so the feet become steadily lighter. Here is a paradox: the weightier we become the lighter we become and the quieter we become.

In sitting we must be upright. As long as we slouch, we disturb all the internal functions. When one straightens up, one can feel how breathing immediately becomes quieter and more satisfying. It can often be observed how people, who are bored or fatigued, in order to come to themselves, take a good strong stretch out of the crooked position. In sitting the joints will be freely movable, and there will be plenty of room for the stomach to function and for the spine to stretch itself to its full extension. If we then swing the torso forward at the hip joints, there is an expansion of the upper portion of the lungs, the same expansion we find so beneficial in swimming and especially in walking against the wind.

Now a word about tension, our third area of study. It may seem that tension comes off rather poorly in our work, but I must say that it only seems that way. Healthy tension is for us in the greatest contrast to constricting. We gladly give ourselves a workout, but we do not wish to wear ourselves out – and that is where the difference lies. In reality, whoever is truly able to relax is also capable of healthy tension. This we perceive as the beautiful changeability of energies that react to every stimulus, increasing and diminishing as required. Above all, it includes the strong feeling of inner strength, of effortlessness in accomplishment – in short, a heightened joie de vivre. Healthy tension, as we understand it, is the possibility of overcoming the greatest obstacles with the greatest ease through the power of heightened breathing.

Generally speaking, in all of this, the most essential things we have to keep in mind are: that any correction made from without is of little value, and that each of us must try to gain understanding for the special nature of our own constitution in order to learn how to take care of ourselves.

Biography

Elsa Gindler (1885-1961) lived and worked in and around Berlin, Germany. As a young woman, healing herself from Tuberculosis deeply influenced her work as she began to develop a very simple, direct process of somatic inquiry that she sometimes called "*Arbeit am Menschen*" – "working with the human being." She led her students, amongst whom were Carola Speads and Charlotte Selver who both brought the work to the United States, how to be "a responsive instrument for living."

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Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D., Editor (jacarletonphd@gmail.com)

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