

## Proprioception and self-knowledge

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“Proprioception” literally means “sensation of self.” It is, in classical neuro-psychology, the sensation of position and movement of parts of the body.

Something important about proprioception is revealed in Gurdjieff’s Movements. Many Movements are, as is well-known, too complex to be directed by the “conscious mind,” especially when different parts of the body are called on to move with different rhythms, different tensions, often contradicting habit and expectation. What then is the experience and the practice of becoming able to do them, and then of actually doing them? There is an experience of the different movements “taking place,” without being directed. Another word for this would be “mechanicalness.” The idea of mechanicalness is often rejected from our way of thinking about Movements because in Gurdjieff’s teaching we are supposed to be becoming more conscious, less mechanical. Let us look a little closer though. What really happens is that each of the sub-movements, the sequence say of positions and gestures of an arm, or steps on the floor, or a movement of inner sensation, is imprinted in the machinery well enough that it is possible for the mind to “let go,” to let it go without directing each position. Then it becomes possible to “let go” several sub-movements at once. Consciousness retracts “upwards,” or “inwards,” to a place of overseeing and appreciating the gearwork of the whole. Perhaps it becomes free enough even to sense a meaning of the whole Movement, a meaning coming from a higher mind, not necessarily capable of being articulated in words, but sometimes articulation is possible.

This is not just a question of physical movements: there are movements of a feeling nature, a moral nature, movement between places in a cosmic diagram, even movements in a mystical dimension, that must take place if the whole form of some of our Movements is to be realized.

We have been told by some of our Movements teachers such as Paul Reynard, that the true movement in Movements is not the movement of the body (or even the non-physical movements just mentioned) but the movement of attention. Such a second movement takes place in stages: first each of the sub-movements must be attended to and gradually mechanicalized; then the attention retracted from that and deployed on another sub-movement; combinations of sub-movements can then be combined and enough attention can be free that it can watch from above. Gradually the whole Movement becomes possible and a still higher movement of attention can take place.

It is not that each sub-movement is completely mechanical: a portion of conscious attention still descends into the sub-movements. This portion of attention is what reveals *proprioception* in action. It is what Pentland referred to as “non-directive skill,” or at least an aspect of that important process. The so-called mind ceases to “direct” and allows the established mechanicality of the body to proceed. The afferent proprioceptive neural system connects directly to the efferent motor impulses that move the muscles and bones; and a certain higher attention is freed to perceive and appreciate the process.

Sometimes it is suggested to look inward and try to perceive *where* a movement comes from. Somewhere in the body. For example, if the right arm is moved in the sequence we know well from the first phrase of the Movement “Lord Have Mercy,” where does the movement come from? It may be that it can be sensed to emanate from somewhere in the center of the chest, perhaps the heart. And the movements of the feet and body may be sensed to emanate from lower down, perhaps the sacrum, where the base of the spine connects to the hipbone. This is another aspect of proprioception.

As Gurdjieff says in *Fragments*, self-knowledge must be founded in the observation of mechanicalness—but that is not the end of it; it can go much higher.

I will add that a similar revelation, including contact with the non-physical domain, can take place in other activities, particularly those requiring long practice. In my experience, this can take place in Martial Arts such as Judo, and in music. Beethoven is supposed to have said “Music is a higher revelation than all science and philosophy.” He also said “don’t only practice your art, but force your way into its secrets.” Gurdjieff’s Movements seem to have been designed in a concentrated form that makes its secrets more readily accessible.