

Alexander Lowen, M.D. and Leslie Lowen

The Way to Vibrant Health

A Manual Of Bioenergetic Exercises

100 Innovative and Powerful Exercises



The Way to Vibrant Health:

A Manual of Bioenergetic Exercises

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I am dedicating this book to my wife Rowfreta Leslie Lowen, who demonstrated in her body the grace and graciousness of vibrant health. The photograph of my wife supporting the male is symbolic of the belief of the ancients that the mother earth holds up the sky father.

Alexander Lowen, October 2003

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The Way to Vibrant Health:

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Part I:

The Basics of Bioenergetics

Introduction

What is Bioenergetics?

Bioenergetics is a way of understanding personality in terms of the body and its energetic processes. These processes, namely, the production of energy through respiration and metabolism and the discharge of energy in movement, are the basic functions of life. 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, which can be freely translated into movement and expression.

Bioenergetics is also a form of therapy that combines work with the body and mind to help people resolve their emotional problems and realize more of their potential for pleasure and joy in living. The fundamental thesis of bioenergetics is that body and mind are functionally identical: that is, what goes on in the mind reflects what is happening in the body and vice versa. The relationship between the three elements, body, mind, and energetic processes, is best expressed by a dialectical formulation shown in the following diagram.

As we all know, mind and body can influence each other. What one thinks can affect how one feels. The converse is equally true. This interaction, however, is limited to the conscious or superficial aspects of the personality. On a deeper level, that is, on the unconscious level, both thinking and feeling are conditioned by energy factors. For example, 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 (his breathing was depressed along with all other vital functions) and the release of feeling, the person comes out of the depressed state.

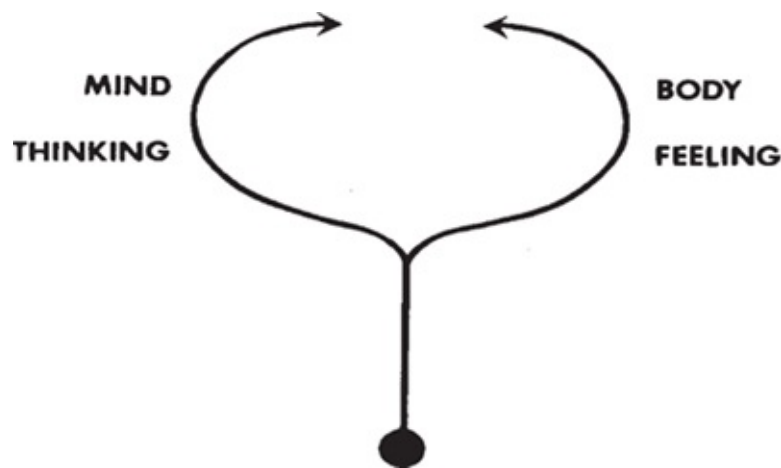


Fig. 1. Energetic processes

The energetic processes of the body are related to the state of aliveness of the body. The more alive one is, the more energy one has and vice versa. Rigidity or chronic tension diminishes one's aliveness and decreases one's energy. At birth, an organism is in its most alive, most fluid state; at death, rigidity is total, rigor mortis. We cannot avoid the rigidity that comes with age. What we can avoid is the rigidity due to chronic muscular tensions resulting from unresolved emotional conflicts.

Every stress produces a state of tension in the body. Normally the tension disappears when the

stress is relieved. Chronic tensions, however, persist after the provoking stress has been removed as an unconscious bodily attitude or muscular set. Such chronic muscular tensions disturb emotional health by decreasing an individual's energy, restricting his motility (the natural spontaneous play and movement of the musculature), and limiting his self-expression. It becomes necessary then to relieve this chronic tension if the person is to regain his full aliveness and emotional well-being.

The body work of bioenergetics includes both manipulative procedures and special exercises. The manipulative procedures consist of massage, controlled pressure, and gentle touching to relax contracted muscles. The exercises are designed to help a person get in touch with his tensions and release them through appropriate movement. It is important to know that every contracted muscle is blocking some movement. These exercises have been developed in the course of more than twenty years of therapeutic work with patients. They are done in therapy sessions, in classes, and at home. People who do these exercises report a positive effect upon their energy, their mood, and their work. The authors do them regularly to promote their own well-being. Wherever we have introduced the exercises, for example, at workshops for professional people, the response has been enthusiastic. We are constantly asked for a list and description of the exercises. This manual is our response to that demand.

We wish to emphasize at the outset that these exercises are not a substitute for therapy. They will not resolve deep emotional problems, which generally require competent professional help. Very often people who are not in therapy and who do these exercises decide that they need and want such help. But work through problems that may have risen to awareness during the course of these exercises. Whether or not you are in therapy, the regular performance of these exercises will help you significantly to increase your aliveness and capacity for pleasure.

These exercises can help you gain more self-possession, with all that this term implies. They will do this by (1) increasing the vibratory state of your body, (2) grounding you in your legs and body, (3) deepening your respiration, (4) sharpening your self-awareness, and (5) enlarging your self-expression. They can also improve your figure, heighten your sexual feelings, and promote your self-confidence. However, 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.

Vibration and Motility

As we have indicated, bioenergetics is the vibrant way to health and the way to vibrant health. By “vibrant health” we mean not merely the absence of illness but the condition of being fully alive. Vibrantly alive is perhaps a more accurate term, for vibration is the key to aliveness. By increasing the vibratory state of the body through these exercises, a person is helped to approach this quality of health.

A healthy body is in a constant state of vibration whether awake or asleep. Look at a sleeping infant and you will see fine tremors pass over the surface of his body. You may observe small twitches in different parts, the face especially, but also the arms and legs. We adults sometimes experience these tremors or twitches, too. A living body is in constant motion; only in death is it truly still. The inherent motility of a living body, which is the basis of its spontaneous activity, results from a state of inner excitement that is continually erupting on the surface in movement. When the excitement mounts, there is more movement; when it falls, the body becomes quieter.

As the vibratory state of the body increases in a coordinated manner, pulsatory waves develop and spread through the body. We are familiar with these waves in the beat of the heart that pulses through the arteries and in the peristaltic movement of the intestines, which is a pulsatory wave. But we do not often experience the pulsatory waves that flow through the whole body in states of full relaxation and intense feeling. In full relaxation respiratory waves pass through the body with each inspiration and expiration (inhaling and exhaling). In states of strong emotion, waves of feeling sweep through the body. Similar pulsatory waves occur in the climax of the sexual act. Usually, however, we do not allow ourselves to relax fully, breathe deeply, or feel intensely.

Vibration is due to an energetic charge in the musculature and is analogous to the vibration occurring in an electrical wire when a current passes through it. The lack of vibration is an indication that the current of excitation or charge is absent or greatly reduced. One can get a clearer picture of this phenomenon by considering what happens to a car when the ignition is turned on. As it starts up, it goes into a strong vibration, which then settles down to a steady hum. This hum (or vibration) will continue as long as the engine is running. Should the engine stop while the car is moving, one immediately senses that it has gone dead by the absence of the hum.

The quality of the vibration in a car or a person's body tells us what shape it is in. When the car shakes or the vibrations are rough, we sense that something is amiss. In a body, gross vibrations are a sign that the excitation or charge is not flowing freely. Just as rapids in a river denote that rocks or other obstacles impede what would otherwise be the smoothness of its course, so too gross vibrations denote that the current of excitation is flowing through muscles that are spastic or in a state of chronic tension. When the tensions are released or the muscle relaxes, the vibrations become finer, hardly perceptible on the surface yet experienced as a delightful purr. Still, it is better to shake than not to vibrate at all. Then, too, there are conditions when a body will shake because of an extremely intense charge. For instance, we shake with anger or tremble with fear, or convulse with sobs and pulsate with love; but regardless of the emotion, we are fully alive in these states.

In the course of bioenergetic work, a person's body is brought into a state of vibration through the

special exercises, described in this manual. The objective is to keep the vibrations going at a fine and steady purr as the excitement builds or the stress increases. In effect, one increases the body's tolerance for excitation and for pleasure. To accomplish this the ego has to be securely anchored in the body, identified with it, and unafraid to go with the body's involuntary responses. The end result is a person whose movements and behavior have a high degree of spontaneity and yet are coordinated and effective: the quality of natural grace.

During this process there is a corresponding change in a person's thinking and attitudes. When the vibrations pass fully through the body, a person feels connected and integrated, all of a piece. Many patients have commented on this reaction. The feeling of unity and integrity leads to a natural sincerity in thought and action. If a person develops bodily grace, he develops the corresponding psychological attitude of being gracious. Such persons are not only vibrantly alive, they are radiant and alive.

Bioenergetic analysis is the name for bioenergetic therapy. In bioenergetic therapy a person is helped to get in touch with himself through his body. By using the exercises described in this manual the person begins to sense how he inhibits or blocks the flow of excitation in his body; how he has limited his breathing, restricted his movements and reduced his self-expression; in other words, how he has decreased his aliveness. The analytic part of the therapy helps him understand the why of the mostly unconscious inhibitions and blocks in terms of his childhood experiences. He is helped and encouraged to accept and express the suppressed feelings in the controlled setting of the therapeutic situation.

The goal of the therapy is an alive body, one capable of fully experiencing the pleasures and pains, the joys and sorrows of life. The more alive we are, the more we can tolerate a heightened excitement in our daily lives and in sex. Analysis of repressed conflicts, release of suppressed feelings, and dissolution of chronic muscular tensions and blocks have the purpose of increasing a person's capacity for pleasure.

The pleasure of being fully alive is anchored in the vibratory state of the body. It is perceived as the full pulsatory expansion and contraction of the organism and its component organ systems, the respiratory, circulatory, and digestive systems, for example. It is felt as streaming sensations in the body reflecting the flow of excitation. It is the sweet melting sensation of sexual desire, the flash of intuition, the longing for closeness and contact, and the throb of excitement.

Vibratory activity is, as we noted earlier, a manifestation of the inherent motility of the organism which is also responsible for spontaneous actions, emotional releases, and internal functioning. This inherent motility is not under the control of the ego or will; it is involuntary. An alive body pulses and vibrates. Naturally, as we become older our bodies become more and more static until they reach the absolute stillness of death. But the premature loss of motility is pathological. This happens, for instance, when we become depressed. Depression is a pathological decrease in the vital functioning of the body, a diminution of motility, feeling, and responsiveness.

In addition to these involuntary movements, we also make many voluntary movements consciously or semiconsciously, such as walking, talking, eating, and so on. In a healthy adult the two kinds of movement, the involuntary and the voluntary, are finely coordinated to produce behavior that is both graceful and effective. This is the way we would all like to be. But true grace cannot be learned. What one learns in a modeling school is how to be a mannequin, not a graceful, alive person. The pose may look attractive in a picture but it strikes one as stiff and awkward in real life, for it is achieved at the expense of the spontaneous motility of the body. One can only achieve grace by increasing the motility of the body, then fusing it with self-awareness to yield a high degree of self-

possession. The mark of the graceful and gracious person, is his self-possession.

One of the most fundamental exercises in bioenergetics is also the easiest and simplest. We use it to start the vibrations in the legs and to help the person sense them. It is also our basic grounding exercise. Doing it without any preliminary warm-up may or may not result in any vibrations. Young people generally respond quickly. Older persons, whose bodies are less charged and more rigid, might not experience them. However, their legs, too, can vibrate after they have done some of the other exercises that reduce their rigidity, deepen their breathing, and increase their energetic charge (amount of energy, excitation, or current in the body).

Exercise 1 / Basic vibratory and grounding exercise

Stand with feet about 10" apart, toes slightly turned in so as to stretch some of the muscles of the buttocks. Bend forward and touch the floor with the fingers of both hands as in figure 2. The knees should be slightly bent. No weight should be on the hands; all the body weight is in the feet. Let the head drop as much as possible.

Breathe through your mouth easily and deeply. Make sure to keep breathing. (Forget about breathing through your nose for the time being.)

Let the weight of your body go forward so that it is on the balls of the feet. The heels can be slightly raised.

Straighten the knees slowly until the hamstring muscles at the back of the legs are stretched. However, the knees should not be fully straightened or locked.

Hold the position for about one minute.

See [Figure 2](#)



Fig. 2. Vibrating bent forward

* Are you breathing easily or are you holding your breath? No vibrations will occur if you stop breathing.

* Do you sense any vibratory activity in your legs? If not, try slowly bending the knee a little, then straighten it to the original position. Do this a number of times to get the muscles to relax.

* Are the vibrations fine or gross, smooth or jerky? In some cases people literally jump off the ground if they can't hold the excitation. Did this happen to you?

We will ask you to try this exercise again after reading the next chapter.

Grounding

You may have noticed if you did the exercise from the preceding chapter that the vibrations in your legs occur when you feel your feet pressing on the ground. The feeling contact between the feet and the ground is known in bioenergetics as grounding. This denotes a flow of excitation through the legs into the feet and ground. One is then connected to the ground, not “up in the air” or “hung-up.” There are, of course, different degrees of feeling contact with the ground depending upon how fully the feet “touch” the ground. People vary widely in this.

To be grounded is another way of saying that a person has his feet on the ground. It can also be extended to mean that a person knows where he stands and therefore that he knows who he is. Being grounded, a person has “standing,” that is, he is “somebody.” In a broader sense grounding represents an individual’s contact with the basic realities of his existence. He (or she) is rooted in the earth, identified with his body, aware of his sexuality, and oriented toward pleasure. These qualities are lacking in the person who is “up in the air” or in his head instead of in his feet.

Grounding involves getting a person to “let down,” to lower his center of gravity, to feel closer to the earth. The immediate result is to increase his sense of security. He feels the ground under him and his feet resting on it. When a person becomes highly charged or excited, he tends to go upward, to fly or to fly off. In this condition, despite a sense of excitation, or elation, there is always an element of anxiety and danger, namely, the danger of falling. This is equally true where one is off the ground as in an airplane. It is resolved when the person is back safe on the ground, physically or emotionally.

The direction downward is the way to the pleasure of release or discharge. It is the way to sexual satisfaction. Persons who are afraid to let down are blocked in their ability to surrender fully to the sexual discharge and fail to experience full orgasmic satisfaction. Letting go means letting down, for we are unconsciously holding ourselves up all the time. We are afraid to fall, afraid to fail, and therefore afraid to let go and give in to our feelings.

Mabel Elsworth Todd in her book *The Thinking Body*, first published in 1937, made the following observation: “Man has become absorbed with the upper portions of the body in intellectual pursuits and in the development of skills of hand and speech. This, in addition to false notions regarding appearances or health, has transferred his sense of power from the base to the top of his structure. Thus using the upper part of the body for power reactions he has reversed the animal usage and has to a great extent lost both the fine sensory capacity of the animal and its control of power centered in the lower spinal and pelvic muscles.”²

In a broad sense, grounding aims at helping a person become more fully identified with his animal nature, which, of course, includes his sexuality. The lower half of the body is much more animallike in its functions (locomotion, defecation, and sexuality) than the upper half (thinking, speaking, and manipulating the environment). These functions are more instinctive and less subject to conscious control. But it is in our animal nature that the qualities of rhythm and grace reside. Any movement that flows freely from the lower part of the body has these qualities. When we pull ourselves up and away from the lower half of the body, we lose much of our natural rhythmicity and grace.

This upward displacement can be reversed through the bioenergetic grounding exercises. As the

body's center of gravity drops into the pelvis with the feet serving as energetic supports, one can sense the self centered in the lower abdomen.

The importance of being centered in the lower abdomen or belly is recognized by most Orientalists. The Japanese, for example, have a word, *hara*, which means the belly and also the quality of being a person who is centered in this region. The exact point, according to Durckheim, is 2" below the navel. If a person is centered at this point he is said to have *hara*, that is, he is balanced both psychologically and physically. The balanced person is calm and at ease; all his movements are effortless and masterful. Durckheim writes: "When a man possesses fully developed Hara he has the strength and precision to perform actions which otherwise he could never achieve even with the most perfect technique, the closest attention or the strongest will-power. 'Only what is done with Hara succeeds completely.'"³ The disciplines of Zen archery, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony are designed to help a person attain *hara*.

Most Westerners are centered in the upper part of the body, mainly in the head. We recognize the head as the focus of the ego, the center of consciousness and deliberate behavior. In contrast, the lower or pelvic center where *hara* resides is the center for the unconscious or instinctive life. Let us say that it is man's animal center, as Todd suggests. When we realize that no more than 10 percent of our movements are consciously directed and that 90 percent are unconscious, the importance of this center becomes evident.

An analogy will make this clear. Think of a horse and rider. The rider with his conscious control of direction and speed functions, like the ego; the horse provides the lower center, the power, and surefootedness to carry the rider where he wants to go. Should the rider become unconscious, the horse would in most cases bring him safely home. But should the horse break down, the rider would be virtually helpless. The best he might do is walk to his destination.

The belly is literally the seat of life. The body sits in the pelvic basket. Through the pelvis, one has contact with the sexual organs and the legs. It is also in the belly that the individual is conceived, and from the belly he emerges downward into the light of day. The loss of contact with this vital center imbalances a person and leads to anxiety and insecurity.

There are two commandments that, if observed, help you become and stay grounded. The first is to keep your knees slightly flexed at all times. Locking the knees when standing turns the whole lower part of the body from the hips down into a rigid structure, which then functions as a mechanical support or a mechanical means of locomotion. It prevents one from flowing into and identifying with the lower part of the body.

The knees are the shock absorbers of the body. When pressure is exerted on a person the knees flex, allowing the force to be transmitted through the body and into the ground. If the knees are locked the force is trapped in the lower back, producing a stress condition that will result in lower back trouble. We are always advised to keep our knees bent when lifting heavy objects. We fail to realize that psychological pressures are the equivalent of physical weights to the body. If we attempt to support these pressures with locked knees, we take their force in our lower back.⁴

Exercise 2 / Flexing the knees

Stand with your feet about 8" apart in your normal position. Observe whether your knees are locked or bent, whether your feet are parallel or turned outward, whether your weight is forward on the balls of your feet or backward on your heels.

Now bend your knees slightly. Turn your feet so that they are absolutely parallel. Pitch your weight forward without raising your heels so that it rests on the balls of your feet. Slowly bend and

straighten the knees six times, and then hold the position for about thirty seconds, breathing easily.

- * Does this position feel unnatural to you? If it does, you have not been standing correctly.
- * Do your legs feel shaky? Do you feel insecure on them?
- * Do you have a better sense of your feet on the ground?
- * Are you aware of the flexibility the knees provide when they are not locked or held tight?

The second commandment is to let the belly out. Many people find this hard to do at first. It violates their image of correct posture and good appearance. They have been brainwashed with the old dictum for proper bearing: “belly in, chest out, shoulders up.” Perhaps this bearing is proper for a soldier who must function like an automaton, but it is the epitome of rigidity. It denies a person autonomy, spontaneity, and sexuality. The sucked-in belly makes abdominal breathing very difficult and forces one to overinflate the chest to get enough air. The continued overinflation of the chest is one of the factors responsible for emphysema. In the next chapter we will describe the healthy and correct breathing pattern more fully. As we shall see, it is dependent upon a relaxed abdominal musculature.

By holding your belly in and your shoulders up, you are using a lot of energy to fight your basic animal nature. And you will not succeed, although you will tire yourself. If someone ordered you to walk around holding your right hand up like the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of freedom, you would regard such a pose as an unnecessary strain. This is equally true of any posture that is forced or willed. It is work to assume any body attitude that requires effort, unnecessary and wasteful work which only serves to create an image.

Letting the belly out seems to offend women especially. They see it as sloppy and unattractive. Their image of feminine beauty is the Playboy bunny, with her tightly sucked-in belly and stuck-out breasts. This is supposed to be sexually exciting to men. Perhaps it is to some men, those who are repelled and afraid of a woman with a belly whom they see as a mother figure. However, a belly is an indication of a mature woman, the absence of a belly of an adolescent girl. The sexual appeal of an adolescent girl is to an adolescent boy (of whatever age), not to a man.

The fact is that the sucked-in belly cuts off all sexual feelings in the pelvis, those lovely melting sensations which transform sex from mere performance and release into an expression of love. What many women really feel about letting the belly out is that it is too sexual. Sloppy means loose, and loose implies a loose woman. In Victorian days women wore corsets to contain their sexuality; they literally could not be regarded as loose women. While we have rejected the physical corset, we have adopted a psychological corset that is even more effective because we cannot take it off at will.

Many men also object to letting the belly out. They are afraid that they will develop a big “pot” which admittedly is unattractive. But when you look at people with a pot you find that the belly is not let out there either. It is tightly contracted and the muscles of the abdominal wall are drawn taut and spastic. There is a constricting band at the level of the navel or the pelvic crests. The pot protrudes above this constricting band, which functions like a dam preventing the downward flow of feeling and excitation. Energy in the form of fat piles up above the dam, producing the bulge so commonly seen in middle-aged men. In time, the tight abdominal muscles also tend to collapse, increasing the bulge.

The following figures show how the bulge develops. Figure 3 shows the natural belly-out posture of an adult person. In figure 4 a pot has developed as a result of damming the downward flow of excitation by tension in the lower abdominal wall. In figure 5 the pot has turned into a paunch as the upper abdominal muscles weakened and stretched under the pressure of the bulge.

If the dam can be broken, that is, if the band of tension can be released, the pot will slowly disappear. I have seen this happen to many men. It can only be done if the person can become aware of the constriction and tightness.

The surprising thing is that most people cannot let their bellies out. The holding in has become part of their way of being and cannot be overcome easily. When they try to let it out (lower abdomen), they find that it goes out only very slightly. Then as soon as their attention is directed elsewhere, it gets sucked in again. The same is true of the locked knees. One can keep them slightly bent when one is conscious of the knees, but they tend to lock up again when one isn't thinking of them. It takes a lot of practice to break these bad habits.

Exercise 3 / Letting the belly out

Stand with your feet about 8" apart and as straight as possible. Bend the knees slightly. Without raising the heels from the floor, lean forward so that the weight of your body is on the balls of the feet. Keep your body straight but not stiff (see figure 3). Now let the belly (lower abdomen) out as far as it will go. Breathe easily for one minute. The purpose of this exercise is to enable you to sense the tensions in the lower part of the body.

See [Figures 3, 4, 5](#)



Fig. 3. Normal belly



Fig. 4. Pot belly



Fig. 5. Paunch

- * Can you let your belly out?
- * Does it stay out or do you find that it gets pulled in again?
- * Does this posture make you feel “sloppy” or “let down”?
- * Do your legs feel shaky? Are you afraid they won’t hold you up?
- * Do your breathing movements extend into the lower abdomen?

Are you breathing into your belly?

Exercise 4 / The bow or arch

This exercise is similar to the preceding one except that it puts the body under stress to open up the breathing more fully and to place more strain on the legs. If done correctly, it helps to release the tension in the belly that causes the pot. A similar exercise is done by practitioners of T’ai chi.⁵

Stand with feet about 18" apart, toes slightly turned inward.

Now place both fists with the knuckles facing upward into the small of your back.

Bend both knees as much as you can without lifting the heels off the floor.

Arch backward over your fists, but make sure that your weight remains forward on the balls

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