



Change in Action - Changing a Walking Pattern or the Hot Cup Theory of Changing Habits

This article is the story of a student who made real change in a short time. She had participated in several choral and conducting classes I was teaching during a University residency where she got basic information about this work. We then had a private session. During that session I asked her what she'd like to work with that would support her art. She said that knee pain and back pain gets in her way. We started with a simple diagnostic tool I use to assess overall coordination by having her walk. The goal being to see why it makes sense her back/knee hurts. Indeed her habitual walk was a slight leaning back that focused forces on her lower back and knees, a common cause of pain. As we explored further that global pattern was evident in singing and conducting. I took her through some explorations to awaken her awareness of the sensation of the habit.

As we ended the lesson I asked her what she understood she would explore on her own. She said what most people say after they've had a contrast experience in which a new way of going about things feels good and better. She said something like, "I'm going to practice walking over my support and looking around." Her focus at that moment was on practicing the new, better way. Logical, right? From my years of experience this "improvement approach" will soon turn into another fixed position and often a state of mind that there is something wrong with her walk (or worse with HER) and she needs to directly fix it.

So we took a bit more time to clarify that the entire purpose of the contrasting experience was less about what she "should" do to be right and more about feeling the sensation of the habit and naming it accurately. This also experientially shows her what an amazing signaling system she has. Her body is fine. She just needs to know how to read the signals. Kind of like when a kid touches a hot cup you don't have to tell her to not touch the cup again. The bad sensation of heat takes care of that. This is a way of turning the invisible habit into a hot cup. Her assignment was to: 1. Be awoken more quickly to the sensation of habit. 2. Stay in habit a bit and ask a few questions: where do I feel pressure? Strain? Force? Where was my attention just then? (Turning the invisible habit into a HOT signal.) 3. After getting a broader sense of the moment and the sensations of habit, then all she needed to do was let herself come out of it. There wasn't a specific "better" to get to just allowing herself move out of the strain, the heat. In this way the change is happening because of her awareness of the "not good" of the discomfort. As she changed her perception and felt the "discomfort of the habit" change did itself, her system wanted to get out of discomfort, just like a kid who has touched a hot cup. It is as if the "good" does itself! There is nothing wrong with her body or her. She just needed to experience her habit as discomfort which is like giving her a more accurate internal compass.

When I saw her a few months later she wasn't walking in habit. I asked her about it and she reported lots less pain in her back and knees. I asked her what she had done and she beautifully described the above process, which at the time of that first lesson was foreign to her and didn't even make much sense. Why wouldn't you just go for the improvement? Noticing habit and staying there can feel like a waste of time at first? But she stuck with the "hot cup" approach. She became clear about letting the system do the change and her job was to be specifically aware when she found herself in habit. As she learns to apply the approach to herself she is learning how to apply it with her students.

The bigger up shot to observing habit was her discovery that when she was walking and thinking about other things she tended to go into habit. As she was more awake to the world around her she was no longer in habit. Both were possibilities and both had effects on her. In this way the "hot cup" approach gives a person tools to continue to learn about their patterns on their own. "Why does it make sense I find myself leaning back? Oh



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because I'm off thinking about my next task." As she began to be clear about that relationship of attention to physical orientation she could simply use the sense of strain to decide where she wanted to put her attention on thoughts or on the world around her. No remembering to be right or present or anything. Just using her built-in sensory system/compass to make choices.

In the end once habit is revealed your job isn't to change it so much as to redefine it as sensation. This isn't walking this is leaning back. As you shine a more accurate light on it, the system will shift away from the "heat" toward less heat.

The heart beat of my work these days isn't to show people an optimal way to function as much as reveal to them how beautifully their system is already designed to guide them to optimal functioning by helping them understand the signals the system gives them through sensation, thought, and feelings. Wholeness in Motion™ and LearningMethods™ are a means to navigate from your built-in compass which in the end is a much more reliable guide than any externally acquired guideline be it postural instructions or life rules.