



COORDINATION OF BLISS

By BABETTE LIGHTNER

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For centuries and across cultures humans have had experiences of bliss, ecstasy, oneness, of mystical realization and transcendence. Myths, religions and self-help books tell guiding stories and draw conclusions about living life based on such heightened experiences.¹ These moments stand out in human life because suddenly we perceive the world in which we've been living completely differently. It is as though we've entered a better, truer and deeper state of reality. The bliss experience is commonly interpreted as a state of being showing us a better way to live, if we could just find it. Sometimes it is interpreted as union with God or an unveiling of the illusion of separateness. The individual's interpretation of these moments is generally taken for granted and rarely questioned. The consequent emphasis in our culture has been placed on how to gain this state and keep it. The bliss experience, which in its essence contains no desire and no interpretation, now fuels our deepest desire to regain this better state of being which we believe exists. In the trying to get something that has no getting in it, we usually fail. I call this contradiction the "bliss experience trap".

Recently I have been examining a model of human structure and function articulated by anatomy and physiology maverick, David Gorman. His model takes an in-depth look at the details of our anatomy and physiology but from the overall point of view of how all these parts fit together in the whole living, sensing, responding, intending human being.² This structural

model sheds new light on the nature of our experience and brought me to question if I was accurately interpreting my own bliss experiences. Is a bliss moment a state of being? If not, what is it? What were the precise ingredients of this experience? Have I, along with humans through the ages, fundamentally misunderstood the nature of these moments because of the power of the feeling? Could a more accurate interpretation resolve the bliss trap and have implications on the nature of human experience as well?

By looking precisely at a particular bliss moment in my own life I uncovered the fundamental flaw of the "state of being" interpretation. I also gained the means to step out of the "bliss experience trap" as I came to understand what really caused that intensity of feeling. I saw that there is no state to attain. Instead I found a means of learning built into us, into the very nature of our structural and functioning system. The yearning for those high moments of bliss dissipates as I learn to navigate my life from my own experience rather than from precepts, commandments and other external guides. The conclusions may ultimately be the same, but the means of learning is drastically different.

There are three aspects of human functioning that are key to accurately interpreting my bliss experience. First, is an understanding of how our system is designed to coordinate us to our intention. The second is our ability to register and evaluate our own experience. Lastly, is an understanding of how we are designed to perceive contrasts and changes rather than a particular state of being.

When we look at human structure from the point of view of how we function in the world it becomes necessary to define what we mean by human coordination. Human coordination is the sum total of our functioning at any given moment: our muscular-

¹ *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell covers a vast array of myths across religious lines; A myriad of spiritually based self help books start with a "bliss experience" story on which the philosophy and advice of the author is based.

² See *Patterns of Being* materials by David Gorman

skeletal-postural tone, our neuro-chemicals, our hormones, our feeling-state and our thinking, all functioning together as one coordinated self. We could zoom in to dissect these seemingly distinct functions separately, but if we step back and see the whole human they are always working simultaneously and in concert. This total response to any given moment is the coordination of the self to whatever particular something we are doing, to our intention.

Crucial to our responsiveness is our innate ability to detect and evaluate our experience. This property is so basic to our nature we overlook it as a fundamental capability that allows us to be drawn toward some things and repulsed by others; this feels good; that feels bad. In this way the capacity to detect and the propensity to respond function like an in-built navigation system. This aspect of our system lets us register the value of our experience, detect problems and navigate our life from our own experience. It is a key to understanding, interpreting and acting from the information already available to us from our own life. It is a key to freedom as long as we don't override or ignore the messages our system is giving us.

There is a phenomenon of feeling change in human movement that applies to interpreting any experience of change like a bliss experience. We perceive where we are in comparison to where we just were. When a person has imposed an idea of "good posture" onto herself with directions like "shoulders back, chest up" her habitual standing posture is usually a slight backward lean. But she feels like she is squarely upright and uses the words "I feel straight". She has been leaning back for so long she no longer perceives the effort it takes to hold herself in this backward lean. If I guide her out of leaning backward to where she is more over her feet she will feel like she is leaning forward and feel light or like she is floating.³

What is commonly misunderstood is that the floating and lightness is the experience of stopping working against herself. It is the experience of the shift from all the effort of working against her in-built balancing system, of imposing a posture, to letting her design balance itself. In other words, she experiences the

³ Another interesting response people have when they are shifted to an easier upright is to say " Well this is easier but it isn't right." I've often worked with people who have been instructing themselves to "pull my shoulders back" and have also been in a lot of pain. When they are guided to stop pulling their shoulders back they've instantly felt relief of pain. Almost as instantly said "But this isn't right". Their idea of "right", usually given to them by an outside expert, has over ridden their ability to respond to their own system's information about what they are doing and the effect of it on them.

contrast from the effort of working against her design to the ease of working with her design. There is no floating state in and of itself to achieve. Instead, she is more light (than she was before), she is more floating (than she was before). If she lets her system balance itself more efficiently, over time she will no longer feel like she is floating because there's no contrast to her effort anymore.

The Wrinkled Quilt Story:

I was home alone. For several weeks my work life had been tumultuous. Dreams of fixing up our old farmhouse were in discussion, but bills were coming in and my income contributions were less than I expected. As a self-employed person this roller coaster of income was not unusual. But there I was in what I call a spin of thoughts. I would jump from thinking about construction to: "oh no, we don't have the money...", "which is all my fault...", "I know better than to let this thinking get me all caught up...", "so maybe now I'll do this or that..."

I was uncomfortable. My stomach felt shaky, my jaw was clenched, my emotions distressed. I sat down to quiet myself and began to write a list of how many students and classes I might need to make more money. At this moment I saw I was responding with my usual strategy to get out of discomfort. I make hopeful lists or close my eyes or say affirmations or pray or breathe consciously. I attempt to make myself feel better; to alter my state; to get from this bad moment to a better moment.⁴ Sometimes I try to understand and change my discomfort by focusing my attention internally and observe myself, my body or my feelings, as if I can split my whole functioning self into an observer and observed.⁵

My experience of these various strategies for change—going internal or making lists—is that I might get temporary relief but rarely solve the problem or learn from it. This time it really struck home that my methods had not been working, so I chose not to try to go in and observe myself in that old way. I asked myself the one question I was capable of asking: "I wonder what would happen if I didn't try to get out of this uncomfortable state?" So I stopped trying to

⁴ See "The Rounder We Go, The Sticker We Get" David Gorman (learningmethods.com/circular.htm)

⁵ This self-observation if looked at accurately is really an attempt to separate my whole functioning self, which is impossible. When I think I'm feeling my body I'm actually experiencing what it feels like to try to split myself into parts—body, mind, feelings—or split myself into an observer and an observed. I'm feeling the feeling of narrowing my attention to my body or feelings. In other words I am feeling my system coordinating me to my intention to feel myself.

change anything and let all my strategies drop away.

Interestingly, almost as soon as I did, my thinking cleared a little. I was able to ask: "What am I doing, the coordination of which is this discomfort?" Based on the definition of coordination as being the sum total of my system's response to my intentions, to what I'm doing, there is an important distinction to make between what I am actually doing as distinct from what is happening to me.⁶ It was clear to me that I wasn't doing the discomfort, though I was feeling it. In other words, I wasn't saying to myself, "clench my jaw, belly shake", but I was doing the worrying about negative outcomes and the confused thinking about solutions. My attention was narrowed to all these ideas about the future and away from the world around me. That's what I was actually doing. The coordination of doing that created all those symptoms of jaw tension, gut wrenching, bio-chemical soup. The discomfort was happening to me as a result of what I was doing; it was a coordination of what I was doing.

Here I was awake to the whole experience of my activity. The discomfort and the action of confused, fearful thinking were all one coordination of my self. I began to be aware of what was actually around me—of the tree branches outside the room moving in the wind. I didn't attempt to see what was around me, it was just what was there for me when I stopped concentrating my attention inward to try to change.

I looked at the quilt on the couch in front of me and saw a wrinkle in it. Hundreds of times over the years in this house filled with rambunctious kids and dogs and cats I've unwrinkled that wrinkle. I saw that wrinkle and suddenly I was in one of those instantaneous shifts of perception. There was no longer anything in me drawing me to change the wrinkle. It was as it was.

I began to register a huge shift of my entire being. Discomfort was no longer a concept. There was simply no impulse to change anything. Interestingly, that was also what I had decided to do—not change anything. It seemed that by some quirk of the

⁶ An everyday example of this distinction is when someone may say, "I'm tightening my shoulders". But on further inquiry we can see that they didn't tighten their shoulders; the tightened shoulders happened when they became afraid of making a mistake, for example. Yet a common result of someone thinking that they are tightening their shoulders is to go around loosening the tight shoulder without ever figuring out what caused the tightening in the first place. Consequently the person will have to keep on loosening shoulders and never really get out of the loop of the problem.

moment I had dropped my usual way of perceiving. This felt like a moment of grace because it had happened to me—I hadn't done it. What I had done was to stop trying to change anything, which in turn resulted in an opening up to what was around me.

To write this I use words which are symbols for objects, actions, experience. They are, in a sense, the map of the world as we perceive it. At the moment of that experience the concept of tree or quilt or wind stopped existing. I could distinguish the impulse to name something from that of simply experiencing existence. It was like seeing the actual territory, not the map. It was clear that the symbol would interfere with clear seeing. There was no hierarchy. No smooth quilt better than wrinkled quilt. The bottom dropped out of any sense of problem. It was the bliss of the absence of identification... no-self... oneness... isness.

In the past, my interpretation of this kind of experience was that it was somehow a truer, better way of being; that this was what it felt like to be fully present. And it felt so good. My interpretation that this good feeling came from a better way of being also led me to want to repeat the experience or keep it. When I wasn't in this lovely state I often felt like I should be. This became the refueling of my bliss experience trap.

I'd had two distinct experiences—the clenched, shaky, distressed one and the present blissful one. One was more pleasant than the other, which normally would have led me to want more of it. While the unpleasant one naturally would have led me to want to get rid of it.

But now with my new understanding of our human function, I had a chance to re-examine what these experiences meant. What if each experience was a different coordination of myself, each perfectly coordinated to what I was doing?

The unpleasant experiences we have are specific, they have symptoms, and wake us up to ourselves. They grab our attention and we are wired to want to change them. Here was my navigation system in action, not a problem to get rid of. In contrast, when we feel good we tend not to notice parts of ourselves but to be in interaction with the world around and we rarely have a desire to change things.

At this point I was clear that the first uncomfortable experience was the coordination of a narrowed, worried thinking. But I wasn't exactly clear what the second more blissful experience was the coordination of. On the surface I could say I was seeing the world around me as it was. But, what I actually had done was stop trying to change anything directly and attempt to perceive as clearly as possible what I was actually doing. But if I simply concluded I can get this blissful feeling by being

more present and noticing the world around me, I would be skipping over the facts of the context of the experience and something important would be missing.

I realized that my bliss phenomena was not a state in itself, but an experience of change from one way of being to another, just like the feeling of lightness when someone has stopped holding their posture so tightly. As a measure of a change, the feeling of bliss was proportionate to the degree of being caught up in distress or misunderstanding. This implies that the experience of bliss of the wrinkled quilt moment was simply the contrast from being caught in a spin of many simultaneous thoughts to the moment of opening up to where I actually was and what I was actually doing.

And as Gorman points out, our coordination experiences have a value register to show us what is good for us so we can navigate our lives. Interestingly, from this point of view, the wonderful bliss component of this experience shows me that my built-in detection system has a bias toward me being present with what I am doing.

In our culture there is a lot of talk and advice about the concept of "being present" vs. "not being present". In this model, we can't be "not present". We are always present to something and what were are present to determines or organizes our coordination. What seems to be true is when we are present to what is actually happening at this particular moment, what we are actually doing, sensing and so forth, our coordination seems to be easy and pleasant. Hence all the focus on being in the moment, being here now, being present. But, if I try to be present I'm already not where I am. I'm wanting a better moment than the one I'm in. This becomes the "be-in-the-present trap".

Understanding that the extent of blissful feeling is proportionate to the previous discomfort explains why at other times when I have not been in a long prior period of distressful coordination the same kind of shift was experienced with less contrast, less difference. I've noticed too when I've had several days in which I've been existing with less of the distanced "symbolic" looking at the world and more "isness", there isn't an ongoing experience of bliss as much as a sense of absence of problems.

The ramifications of interpreting my blissful experience as the experience of a shift of coordination rather than divine grace or better state of being to aspire to has liberated me. I experienced literally how my system is absolutely designed to lead me toward ease of being as long as I don't override the messages from my system or try to divide myself into parts. When I'm experiencing discomfort it is so much less intense because I know my system is

somehow waking me up to my working against myself or against the way the Universe works. Now I can simple ask myself, "what am I doing that is coordinating me into this discomfort?" The question lets me be where I am—pleasant or unpleasant. It gives me the tools for gaining understanding of what it is I'm actually experiencing in it's fullest context allowing me to navigate my life from information available to me from my own experience. It becomes clear there's no state to attain, no enlightenment to achieve. Everything is all here at any moment when I use my own in-built navigation system.

The model of Human Structure and Function articulated by David Gorman, author and teacher, gives us a process for beginning to look at the "anatomy" of our experience. The details of this model explain the interface between our physical molecular structure and our everyday experience of being one self living in the world. This contribution to the body of knowledge has implications in every area of human behavior. It is a truly holistic model in which thinking, feeling, understanding and the physical structure are never divided but always seen as one expression of a self in action. In this model there is no wonderful end-state to attain, but rather an ongoing means of learning to acquire more and more wisdom and harmony. It is a means for liberating a person from the traps of faulty interpretations and assumptions so they can take in precisely and clearly what is actually available to them in their experience at the moment of being.

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See short biography of the author on the next page

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is director of *Stones in Water* — a Movement Education and LearningMethods Center in Wisconsin. Lightner is a Registered Somatic Movement Educator, has a degree in Dance, is a Certified Teacher of the Alexander Technique and is one of four Certified LearningMethods Teachers in the United States. For ten years she taught in the Professional Actor Training Program at the University of Minnesota. She created human coordination classes for the Music Department at the University of Minnesota and at Macphail Center for the Arts. She was the Artist in Residence for the Theatre Department at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls. Lightner has lectured and taught for many universities, institutions and organizations including the Guthrie Theater, Sister Kenny Institute, Balk Opera Music Institute, Voice Center of Fairview, Taipei National University of Arts in Taiwan. She is on the faculty of the VoiceCare Network. For 18 years Lightner has maintained an individual practice initially as an Alexander Technique Teacher and currently as a LearningMethods teacher. In this practice she works with people dealing with pain, and stress issues and with performers who want to get better at what they do.



Her explorations into human movement have taken her around the world from dancing with a folk dance troupe in the villages of South India to performing with a post-modern physical theatre company in the warehouses of Boston. She is currently one of a handful of teachers pioneering a new paradigm for understanding human structure and function in the *Anatomy of Wholeness™* workshops.

Babette has developed her own movement work called *Wholeness in Motion™*. This innovative approach brings together her range of expertise in movement work including: LearningMethods, Alexander Technique, Yoga, Tai Chi Chuan, Body Mind Centering, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Modern and Ethnic Dance, Mindfulness, and Laban Movement Analysis. She maintains an active workshop and lecture schedule.

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