

# Self, Other, Earth, & Cosmos – and the Dorsal/Ventral Relationship

by John Appleton

<http://posturereleaseimagery.org/>

As a teacher of the Alexander Technique, I was trained to seek within myself ... and then within my students, release of habits interfering with a theoretical construct called Primary Control. I had found Alexander lessons very rewarding. They brought me relief from body pains and lifted my spirit and sense of self. With excitement, I endeavored to inhibit unnecessary and interfering habits of use that I could discern in myself... and, in time, I tried to teach this inhibition to my students, as well as discover their interfering habits.

Over time, I did not abandon the hands-on skills I had learned as a teacher but I did develop new and additional ways to assist in the release of habits that interfered with the Alexander Technique's "Primary Control" as well as interfered with other theoretical constructs that I had developed along the way. Foremost of these constructs (all new principles of healthy structure/posture) was the development of a theory of the appropriate relationship of the dorsal and ventral surfaces of the body. The means of exploring and attaining this appropriate relationship, as well as other relationships, became specific imagery that I came to call Posture Release Imagery.

My original idea and principle concerning the dorsal and ventral surfaces of the body was that healthy and efficient support of our structure (and that of probably all land-bound tetrapods) comes from the appropriate relationship of the dorsal and ventral surfaces.<sup>A</sup> This relationship is the following - that the entire dorsal surface gently expands upward and outward and the entire ventral surface gently contracts downward and inward in order to provide the most efficient response to gravity. This response is the sensory/neurological model for the proper positioning of the skeletal system by means of the muscular system.<sup>B</sup>

This original perspective concentrated on the importance of the relationship of the dorsal and ventral surfaces to the gravitational field.

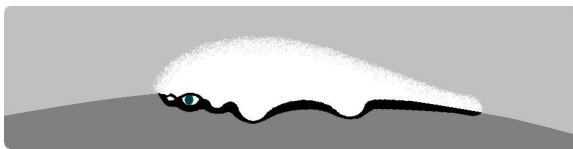


Fig. 1 shows a "first stage" upright creature. It is a depiction of an *archetypal relationship to gravity*.

*Fig. 1 – archetypal relation to gravity*

At first, posture and use seemed to me, as it does to others, to be primarily an issue of "getting right" with gravity. I have since come to see the body's relationship to gravity is a secondary (though *strong* secondary) issue. In my new concept, together with the thinking of Jan b Eyskens,<sup>1</sup> the body's relationship to *itself* is paramount. Stated differently, the relationship of the dorsal and ventral surfaces to *each other* is most important, independent of gravity.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan b Eyskens, <http://www.doorvoelbewegen.be>, has assisted me considerably to see the full significance of the relationship I am about to explain, the relationship to self.

## Relating to oneself

What could possibly be meant by “the body’s relationship to itself”?  
The figures below begin to illustrate what I mean.

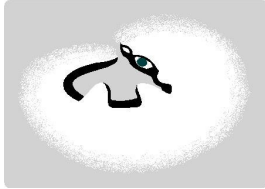


Fig. 2 – archetypal  
relation to self



Fig. 1 (repeated)

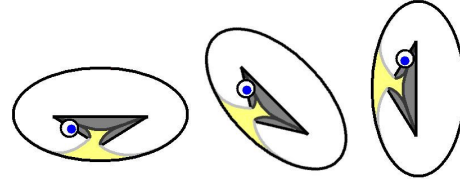


Fig. 3

Fig. 2 might seem like a “baby” version of Fig. 1. Alternately, it might seem like an embryonic version, within an egg or womb, as in Fig. 3. However, I consider it a depiction of *an archetypal relationship to self*. I am not saying that the embryonic and baby stages of all organisms look exactly like this. I am saying that the dorsal and ventral surfaces of organisms relate to each other similarly, where the dorsal surface tends toward at least mild expansion and the ventral surface tends toward at least mild contraction. We can state this principle in a way to enhance our postural health and understanding of appropriate use and function: the dorsal surface *should* generally tend toward at least mild expansion and the ventral surface *should* generally tend toward at least mild contraction in order to function optimally.

Adult humans, in health, are oriented around their ventral surfaces, as the principle above suggests. Fig. 4 shows the general *neutral body posture* (NBP) of astronauts, independent of gravitation (while in zero gravity). Though this is a generalized depiction of NBP, individuals would show variations from this because of various tensions they have, keeping them from attaining a truly neutral body posture. Some would show straighter limbs, a back or neck more hollowed, and so forth. If these variations were persistent, it would seem to indicate the relationship between their dorsal and ventral surfaces is not ideal.

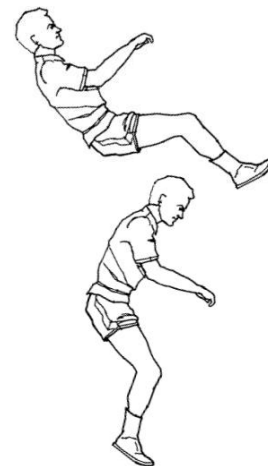


Fig. 4 – neutral body posture  
in microgravity<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These figures are derived from a NASA article and drawings on neutral body posture in micro-gravity:  
<http://ston.jsc.nasa.gov/collections/TRS/techrep/TM-2003-104805revA.pdf>

## Relating to other

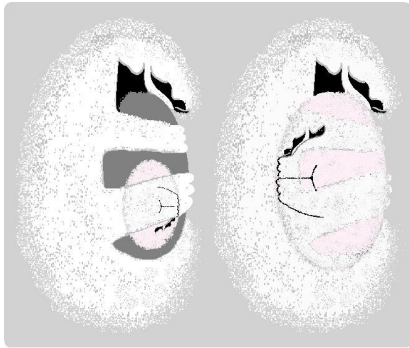


Fig. 5 – “with child” and with child

What seems to be implicitly promoted in all of these above depictions is an expanded dorsal (a portion of which in the context of Alexander Technique language would be translated as “back to lengthen and widen”). Contraction of the ventral is also noticeable, but what may not be obvious is the ventral’s orientation toward having contact with something. Organisms in the fetal position can be considered to be oriented toward, or “seeking” ventral contact with *themselves*. However, any organism in a later stage of maturity has a ventral surface oriented to having contact with something *other* than themselves. Mother and child is an obvious example (Fig. 5), yet the “other” also includes “mother” earth itself (discussed later).

The results of relating to *self* or *other* are similar and consistent with each other. Being related to self and other can be compatible orientations. Both involve a strong tendency toward ventral *contraction* and dorsal *expansion*. Fig. 6 shows their similarity. In both forms, the basic principle of dorsal expansion and ventral contraction are present.

Fig. 7 shows the *self* relating to *other* as an archetypal image of ideal posture. Interestingly and importantly, the image of this “lamb and egg,” though not derived from a concern for proper balance in the gravitational field, still strongly promotes it. An outgrowth of a healthy relationship to self is a healthier relationship to gravitational forces. If, for instance, people successfully and strongly imagine the “lamb and egg” image exercise,<sup>3</sup> they will find themselves bobbing up into an upright position even if they start with slouching in a chair.

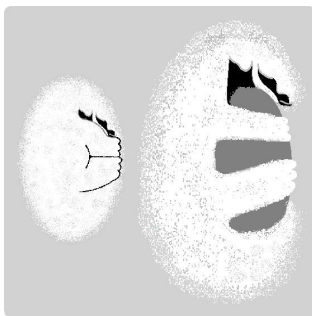


Fig. 6 – related to self or other

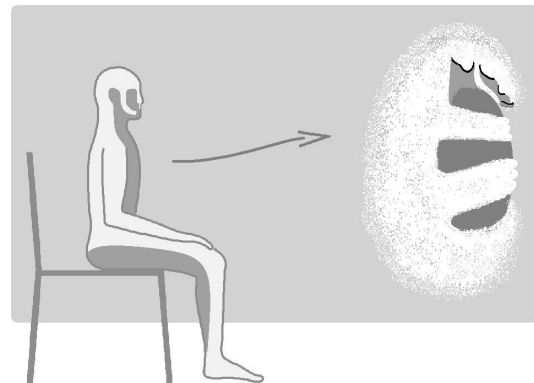


Fig. 7 – image exercise (showing dorsal and ventral surfaces on humans)

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<sup>3</sup> For a full description of how to carry out this imagery exercise, see exercise #2 on, <http://posturereleaseimagery.org/posture-exercises-universal-imagery>.

We now see (Fig.5) that the archetypal relationship portrayed as a fetus in the womb is essentially the same as the caring posture exhibited by mother (or father) to child. The dorsal covers and protects and the ventral protects and nourishes.

Next, I argue that the dorsal-ventral relationship is still maintained in a more expanded version when any individual meaningfully and caringly relates to another or to many others, as in a group. In Fig. 8, my dear friend Ed shows his signature gesture of welcome, which reflects the



Fig. 8 – Ed

same caring nature that is found in the embracing of a child. The “caring curve” is still present. If a person is sticking out his or her chest, we may think of them as arrogant, therefore not openly caring of others. Conversely but also similarly, if a person is too contracted in their chest, we may think of them as too humbled (not humble). They can be seen as too contracted to be openly or usefully caring of others, only of themselves. The curve of the head, “tail,” or

legs exceedingly inward or outward, if maintained persistently, can similarly suggest emotional or personality qualities that are unhealthy for our structure as well as perhaps for our emotional and psychological lives.

I have chosen *caring* as the most all-encompassing word I can think of to characterize the affect associated with the general dorsal-ventral relationship I describe. Consider for a moment images of people being “careless.” There is a visible or, at least, “sensed” throwing away of the dorsal-ventral relationship to be seen in this act. Being carefree, careless, or non-caring can hide tensions behind a display of “freedom.” Unfortunately, *freedom* from tension is too often the dominant or only goal in a person’s mind who takes up one or another mind/body discipline. It may be more important to develop a healthy disposition toward embracing and protecting (a.k.a. caring), which will, in turn, aid in the attaining of that tension-free freedom. Some relief from somatic complaint can be found in the adage, “If you want to be happy, make someone else happy first.” Its truth is no doubt connected to the principle that I promote here.

Caring is not a term that is used in body relationship descriptions in the Alexander Technique or any other discipline where general use is what is “cared about”... but I think it should be. In psychophysical (re)education disciplines, if we talk only about body mechanics or freeing this or that, I think that many quietly assume that balance in the gravitational field and release of unnecessary tension leading to “good posture” are the only appropriate subjects. As a result, some “balance” within us that affects postural balance and unnecessary tension is not achieved. It is a valuable goal to seek to experience and then maintain *emotional* balance and to *release* whatever interferes with healthy caring, healthy desire, healthy assertiveness, healthy humility, and so forth. It affects the very musculature that is interfering with our weight commitment, our primary control, our goals for “good posture,” freedom of choice, and freedom from unnecessary tension.

In the Alexander Technique, we are concerned with “choice.” Freeing the head/neck/back relationship gives us more freedom to choose (largely by inhibiting startle reflex patterns and allowing us more time to choose). This is true, as well, with balancing through improved weight commitment (which reduces muscular gripping, which is the antithesis of choice). I contend that kinesthetically experiencing with PRI imagery the appropriate dorsal-ventral relationship, as well as wave-like variations of that relationship, gives us an increased awareness of our emotional body and its potential for expression and peace. These suggested experiences have everything to do with Alexander Technique’s matters of interest as well as for those involved in Yoga, Tai Chi, the Feldenkrais method, and the many other somatic or mind/body disciplines.

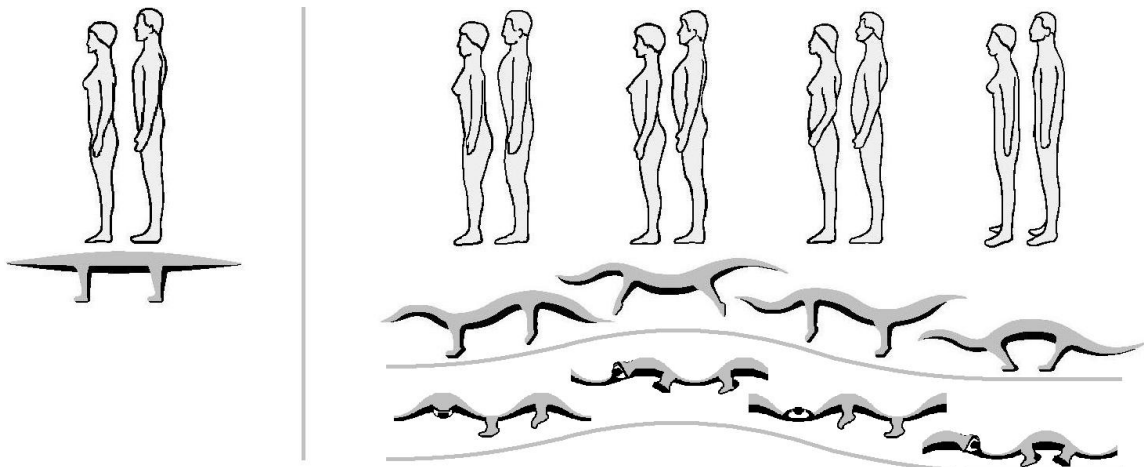


Chart 1 – “Non-couple” male and female versions of the same dorsal-ventral tonal patterns

Chart 1 above and Chart 2 below show bodies that may appear to need Alexander lessons or other somatic experiences (except perhaps the more neutral models shown separately above). They also appear to expose different emotional natures or personalities. They represent varied divergences from a more neutral (archetypal) dorsal-ventral relationship (shown to the left of each chart) but are by no means to be thought of as all “bad.” Some variation is the spice of life and a necessary form of psychophysical and emotional *division of labor* in humanity.

Chart 1 shows a frozen dorsal-ventral wave in males and females. The illustrations are merely to indicate how the tonal relationship of the dorsal and ventral surfaces can vary. Individuals can vary considerably from the examples pictured and still have one of the basic patterns in their tonal makeup or form.

Chart 2 shows couples facing each other that are formed from “opposites.” This is the predominant male-female couple relationship pattern, to be “opposites” in tonal and some personality patterns (though quite possibly similar in many other ways... such as likes, dislikes, and some behaviors.) People can obviously vary in height, weight, color, etc. and still have similar dorsal-ventral relationship tonal qualities. These variations affect and may actually create their style of *caring* and other emotional and personality features they express.

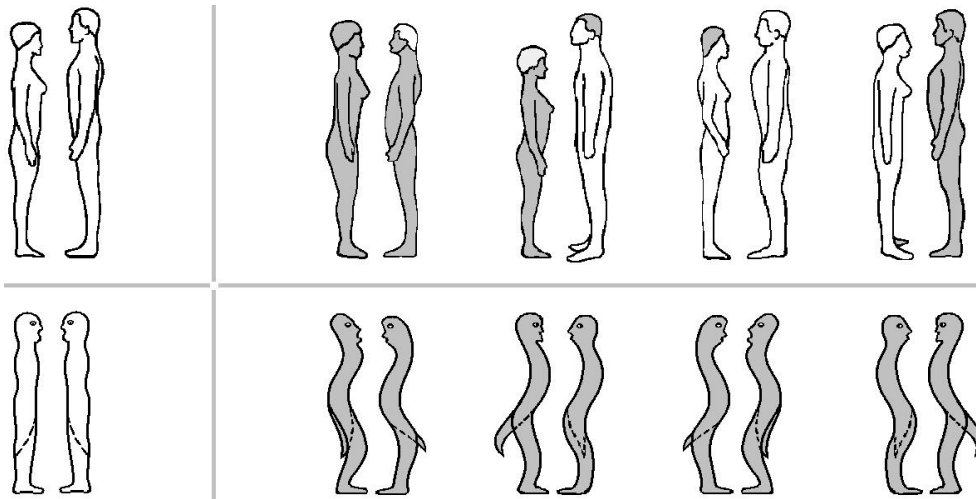


Chart 2 – Couples (with opposite dorsal-ventral tonal patterns)<sup>C</sup>

## Relating to Earth

We are land-bound tetrapods. Though we walk on two legs, our heritage is with horizontally oriented creatures with four legs on the ground. Even earlier, our heritage is with creatures in the sea that developed in a very different gravitational environment. The influence of the

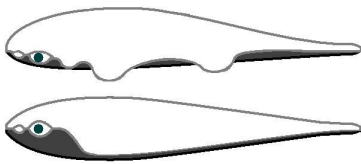
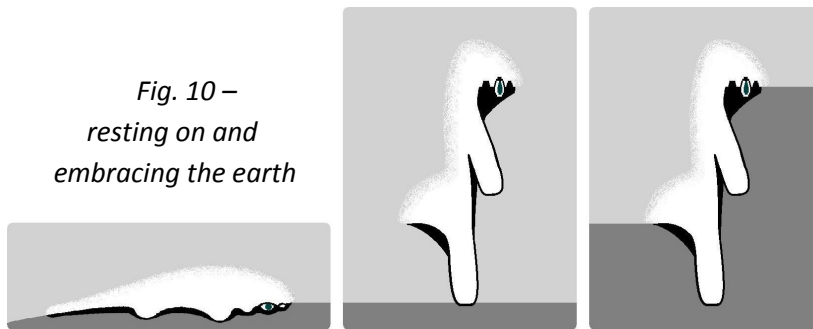


Fig. 9 – d-v surfaces on land and sea

vertical pull of gravity is diffused in water to become multi-directional water pressure, which, especially at increased water depths, is much greater than air pressure. The expansion of the dorsal surface is important to offset this pressure and so the ventral surface is represented here in the bottom figure of Fig. 9 as a much smaller portion of the body along the extreme bottom.

For many of us, our relationship to the earth is not a positive one. Setting aside all the possible directions I can go with that sentence, the earth (as ground) is something that can, especially as we get older, injure us and cause us considerable pain if we lose our balance and fall.

It is certainly true that if we *carelessly* tempt fate, the earth's gravity can exact quick justice. However, it is important that the ground not be implicitly viewed as the enemy. The solution to the question of balance is not to think of ourselves as "tottering bipeds," needing to learn balance because at any moment we may become potential victims of the great pull gravitation exacts. The solution is to *embrace* the earth (Fig. 10 below).



This may sound like just a poetic line; however, it is nothing more than an extension of the appropriate dorsal-ventral relationship with the *self* and *other* that we have already discussed. However, by imagining that we are resting on and gently embracing the earth with our entire ventral surface immediately changes the postural configuration within our bodies so that a sense (and greater reality) of security reigns. That is all that is needed to be balanced... the imagined sense that one is so much in contact with the ground with its entire ventral surface that there is no balancing required. The result of this image is that the appropriate shifting to upright is automatic when the appropriate body surface sensation is present. That sensation is one of a gently contracted ventral surface that somehow feels itself in contact with the earth. With no balancing required, there is no fear or uncertainty. (Actually lying belly down on the floor or a mat does not produce that sense of security that the imagery can because our “neutral body posture” is not “flat” and a flat surface does not make contact with our entire ventral surface).<sup>D</sup>

Fig. 10 shows, on the left, the close or nearly complete contact with the ground that a land-bound archetypal tetrapod has. The illustration in the middle shows the precarious balance we think ourselves to have on that same ground. The illustration on the right solves the problem of the sensed precariousness by imagining the ground fully supporting the ventral surface. It is as simple as that to become, both immediately and over time, more “grounded.” F.M. Alexander said: “You can’t tell a person what to do, because the thing you have to do is a sensation.” The imagery I propose here provides a useful, no, the essential sensation one needs for an ideal relationship with the earth/ground. We do not need the image within us but we do need the sensation that this image gives to our ventral surface. If we lack this otherwise nameless sensation, why not use the image to retrieve it?<sup>E</sup>

Since the above description (of the ventral surface’s close relationship with the earth) is very important to understanding my view of the dorsal/ventral relationship with itself and everything about it. For clarity, I would like to reiterate this description slightly differently:

The earliest land-bound organisms were in the closest contact with the ground. Virtually their entire ventral surfaces were directly supported by the earth much of the time. This provided them with specific but unnamed sensations. However, as organisms came away from the earth up on to four legs, the ventral surface maintained the sense of secure connection with the earth by maintaining the dense and contracted sense that the parts (feet) in contact with the ground had.<sup>F</sup>

Later, as we became “second stage” upright (on to our “hind” legs), which gives us more options; we did **not** lose that historical security with the earth. We only think that we have, due to misuse of natural function. Our ventral surface should remain generally directed toward and associated with the ground (if only slightly) as it was as a simpler creature. Though we may think that we are teetering on two little legs, we are, when posturally healthy, supplied with considerable internal, external, and surface data to keep us well oriented in space and safe from gravitation’s potentially dangerous bite. By merely imagining that the ground (as in the right frame of Fig. 10 above) supports us at every ventral point, just as it does for simpler creatures, we can come to feel secure and “grounded.” This grounding will also allow us a new freedom of the dorsal surface (discussed below). These imagery-based experiences are *kinesthetic* learning experiences and can become part of our general use.

From success with this and other posture release imagery, it should become understandable that it is our tactile/kinesthetic/proprioceptive sensations, aided here by some visual data (and visual imagery here), that controls and promotes the appropriate use of our bodies. Humans may generally have, as FM Alexander said, “debauched kinesthesia,” a poor sense of the relative status and location of body parts in space and in relation to each other. However, rather than merely distrusting our kinesthetic senses, we can ask the question, what constitutes “undebauched” kinesthesia? What is healthy kinesthesia? And what are the sensations we should be having? I think that the answer is in PRI imagery and the principles behind them.

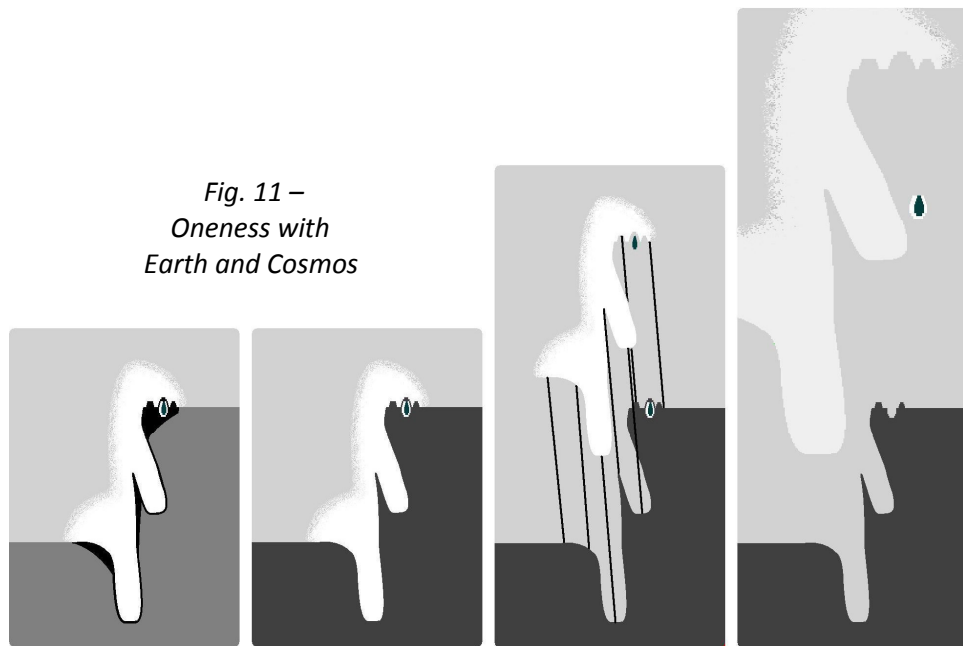
Up to this point, we have studied my vision of the complimentary relationship of the dorsal and ventral surfaces of the body to itself, to others, to the earth/gravity. We are “cared for” and “made caring” by this relationship. We are made secure by maintaining a sense that our ventral surface is “embracing” the earth (as well as sensing that surface as dark and dense in contrast to sensing the dorsal surface as light and fluffy).

Now comes an opportunity for an illuminating experience, beyond mere success with releasing some tensions and restoring some calm with the above-mentioned imagery. It is the opportunity for a religious or spiritual experience and release of unnecessary tensions and to “experience oneness” by becoming “one with the earth and cosmos.” This, of course, could easily make me sound like a modern snake oil sales representative.<sup>6</sup> However, it must be noted that experiences we have are always physical experiences, though they may be emotional, spiritual, and so forth as well. Moreover, envisioning yourself as this article suggests is so non-habitual as to be potentially life changing. Therefore, just read and experiment with the following. It is free and nonpoisonous:

### *Becoming One with the Earth & Cosmos*

Illustrated below, in Fig. 11, are two more stages beyond the drawing above, Fig. 10 above, which started with recognition of the healthy response to the gravitational imperative. Following an established sense of 1/dorsal-ventral “caring” and 2/dorsal-ventral “gravitational security,” the dorsal surface is free to expand, to release upward and outward, and to become one with the universe. This undoubtedly sounds like “over the top” imagery, becoming one with the universe, but PRI imagery is not for the faint-hearted or absolute literalists. Posture release imagery works better when the imagery is vivid and maybe “over the top.” The mind has to overcome the habitual thinking that is producing unwanted habitual responses... and pain, for

instance. At this point, we have already become connected with others and ourselves and “balanced” through grounding with nature. Now we can let go, release unnecessary control, and have even more experiences... akin to peace and awe.



As Fig. 11 shows, by using imagery we cannot only rest our contracted dense ventral surface on the earth but we can join and *become* one and the same, ventrally, with the earth. And... we cannot only rest our light and fluffy dorsal surface on top of the ventral surface but we/it can float upward like a tethered balloon, secured along the edges (dorsal-ventral seam) of our body. Finally, we can break those ties, expand, and *become* one, dorsally, with the cosmos.

These are two forms of extreme release. One does not succeed with this imagery immediately or in one session nor is it something that is ever to my knowledge perfectly easy to replicate. However, the physical, cognitive, psychological, and spiritual rewards justify the challenge. Allowing your ventral weight and tension to become the earth is to completely release and will seem to be something more than “grounded.” Dorsally expanding and floating upward and outward to the skies and beyond is to completely release by dispersing your dorsal surface into something much bigger than yourself. Ease, confidence, and humility can be experienced all at once. Anyone attaining any level of success imagining this combination of images will be physically and spiritually stretched in new ways, all of them healthy and valuable stretches.

One final note about this image. The last panel shows the ventral dissolving into the weight of the earth, the dorsal dissolving into the lightness of the air and space, and the eye (or “I”) suspended between the two sensed halves of the body. My experience is that the “I” or “me” in an image is something that is located in the eyes or just behind the eyes. The rest of “me” tends to be thought of as “parts” of me. Therefore, in this image, the greatest challenge... and reward is to attempt to envision both dorsal and ventral parts leaving “you” behind. This is difficult to attain, since the “I” seeks, for reasons of security, to be attached to something. But this aspect of the image is appropriate, since in a psychologically healthy life, “we” are not outer surfaces, our outer appearances, or that which is apparent to others. The “self” is much more than that, something mysterious within a growing awareness and existence.

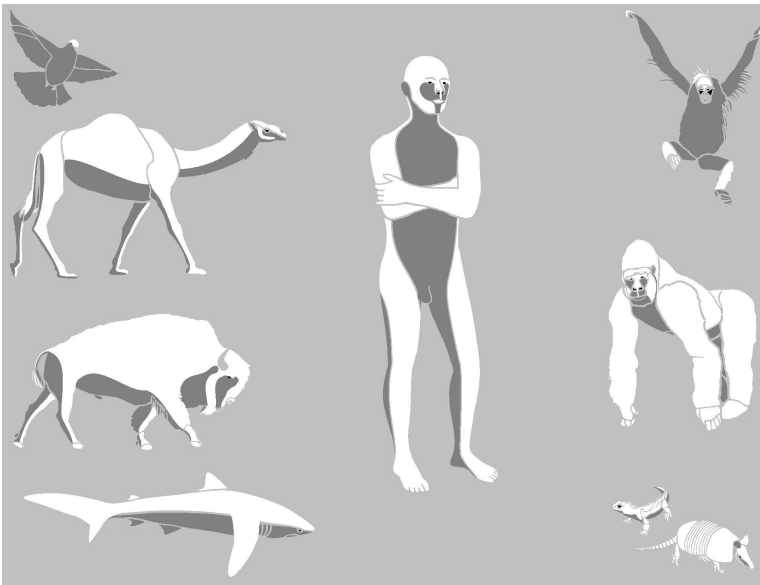
Comments I have made undoubtedly sound very philosophically and spiritually oriented and, therefore, may seem a fuzzy, non-scientific means to describe healthy structure and posture. It appears, though, that the expanded principle of the dorsal-ventral relationship introduced here would not have been possible to ascertain or describe without the expanded vocabulary used here and the use of visual imagery. It also requires not only a discussion of what *is*, but also of what is *possible*.

Questions, comments, and/or appreciation are welcome. Send emails to [appleton.john@yahoo.com](mailto:appleton.john@yahoo.com) . Thank you, John Appleton

#### ENDNOTES –

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<sup>A</sup> This illustration shows the dorsal surface (white) and the ventral surface (dark gray) on numerous animals and man. The assignment of either “dorsal” or “ventral” to most of the areas would not be refuted but a couple of the minor suggestions are my own.



<sup>B</sup> Below is quoted the entire principle from my website (with one small edition):

Healthy and efficient support of our structure (and that of probably all land-bound tetrapods) comes from the appropriate relationship of the dorsal and ventral surfaces.

This relationship is the following - that the entire dorsal surface gently expands upward and outward and the entire ventral surface gently contracts downward and inward in order to provide the most efficient response to gravity.

This response is the neurological model for the proper positioning of the skeletal system by means of the muscular system, allowing the extremities to work most efficiently.

All the new principles are listed at <http://posturereleaseimagery.org/new-principles-of-healthy-posture> .

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<sup>C</sup> See <http://posturereleaseimagery.org/posture-exercises-type-specific-imagery> and <http://posturereleaseimagery.org/my-articles> for information and imagery exercises especially related to the various postural/personality types .

<sup>D</sup> This picture depicts what might be called a ventral chair. Some structure like this may be the one way that enough to the ventral surface could rest on something solid and provide something akin to the ventral-surface-on-the-earth image exercise.



<sup>E</sup> For another description of this image exercise, see <http://posturereleaseimagery.org/posture-exercises-universal-imagery> , exercise 3.

<sup>F</sup> It is common to think of the ventral surface of an animal as the “soft underbelly” and to think of the dorsal surface as the “hard outer shell.” I contend, however, that the muscular and tonal qualities of healthy tetrapods (which includes us) is closer to the opposite.

<sup>G</sup> Snake oil may actually have its value.  
[http://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2009/07/snake\\_oil\\_sales.html](http://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2009/07/snake_oil_sales.html)