

Welcome to *The Six Bridges Revisited*, Volume 2, Issue 3 of *Alternativz*. I write this article 10 years after introducing the concept of a “bridge”, partly to commemorate our 10 year anniversary and partly to inform those who may not know of *The Six Bridges* – the formal progressive relaxation method of the Coherent Breathing system. Personally, I consider “bridge theory” to be one of our more important contributions to the science of human psychophysiology.

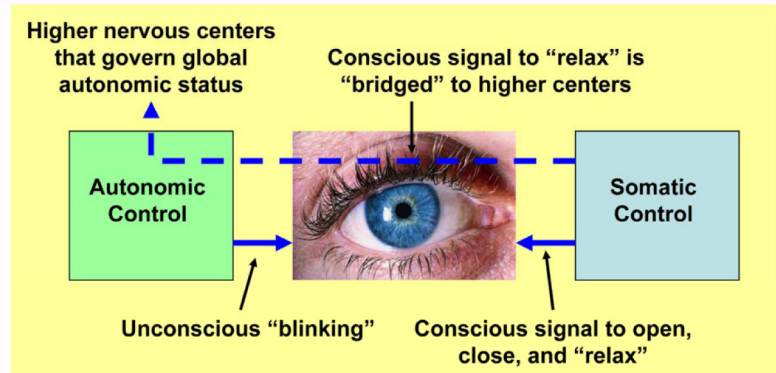


Figure 1: The Eye Bridge

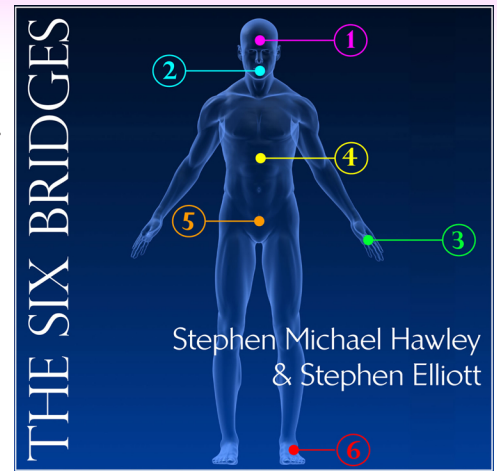
For a bit of context, as explained in *The New Science Of Breath (2005)*, the theory arose as an outgrowth of my interest in the curious “dual control” that we and other vertebrates have over the function of breathing, this is, we can inhale and exhale when we want to, and we can hold our breath when we wish, but when we’re not paying attention to our breathing, the autonomic nervous system will take care of it *automatically*. As breathing is a function of diaphragm movement, the diaphragm, the strong sheath of muscle that separates abdominal and thoracic cavities is the breathing *bridge*. In combination with the intercostals, it is a muscle group with nervous control that is in concept half conscious and half unconscious. Importantly, by exerting conscious control over it, we are able to effect change on the unconscious side of things, i.e. we are able to effect changes in biometrics that are otherwise determined autonomically. It seems that the reverse is also true, that by letting breathing run automatically, changes are effected on the conscious side – we can clearly perceive a difference in how we feel and function.

The point is that “bridges” are body zones that facilitate conscious interaction between somatic (conscious) and autonomic (automatic) nervous functions; these are not separate physical systems, but logical distinctions we make regarding how the central nervous system works. The “somatic” nervous function provides overt conscious control, for example opening and closing the eyes, or inhaling and exhaling. The autonomic nervous function is generally considered to be “automatic” and beyond our conscious control – but, via *bridges*, we can in fact exert significant control over it, to our advantage. Bridges offer us this control, the question becomes one of employing them to this end, i.e., to use bridges to self-govern or not.

While the *breathing bridge* may be the most powerful, it didn’t take long to connect the dots with other body functions that share this “dual control”, including 11 other muscle groups, for example the eyes, which are perhaps the next most compelling bridge, where opening them wide stimulates sympathetic (activating) function and closing them gently asserts parasympathetic (relaxing) function. In the great scheme of things, what these 12 bridges (that can be generalized into 6) have in common is that they are the primary means by which we interact with the world – they control body I/O – input/output. When they are tense, we are closed, our shields are up. When they are relaxed, we are open, our shields are down. To this point, bridges are tattvas that facilitate unification with the world or isolation from it.

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Prior to this, Dr. Stephen Porges had put forward his “polyvagal theory” which described a relationship between facial muscles (and associated nervous function) and heart rate, specifically heart rate variability (HRV), variation of heart beat rate over time, a biometric about which there was much mystery. Dr. Porges describes that this “wiring” has evolutionary roots having to do with communication and social interaction and describes the larger biological function involving the face and the heart as a “social engagement system”. Also, in 2007, Dr. Les Fehmi published *Open Focus* which employs relaxation of the eyes along with heart focus to dissolve away anxiety and pain and resolve internal impediments. I hold both Dr. Porges’ and Dr. Fehmi’s work in high regard.



The Six Bridges CD

After many revisions dating back to 2006, in 2010 we published *The Six Bridges*. It is a guided practice that involves simultaneous Coherent Breathing and conscious progressive relaxation of the face, the tongue and throat, the hands, the diaphragm, the perineum, and the feet, *the six bridges*. The practice employs Coherent Breathing in a horizontal body position to establish the conditions for relaxation to occur. It then leads us through progressive relaxation of the six body zones, inhaling in time with six ascending notes and exhaling with six descending notes.

There are a number of therapeutic effects at work in the recording: a) Stephen Hawley’s narration employing subtle NLP techniques, b) the “music” which employs a certain disharmonic quality that relieves pain and unties granthis in the body/mind, and c) Coherent Breathing which facilitates a wave in the circulation and balances the autonomic nervous system. Practiced in a horizontal body position, the effect of gravity is normalized over the length of the body, blood is free to flow – particularly to the brain, and the body may let go completely.

One of life’s challenges is to prevent the build up of stress and its result, tension, which ultimately manifests as stiffness and discomfort of both body and mind. When practiced daily, *The Six Bridges* sweeps the body and mind clean of insult and injury, preventing its accumulation, which is really a nervous system matter, i.e. stiffness is a result of “noise” in the nervous system that results in activation of low threshold muscle motor units throughout the body. Our goal is to minimize this noise and with it, tension. (This is a fundamental objective of yogic practice.) If we fail to do this, the body gradually becomes “stiff”. As the body becomes stiff, the mind becomes anxious and inflexible.

I practice *The Six Bridges* every morning when I wake up and I have been for ~10 years now. If for some reason I am unable to practice, there is a certain amount of discomfort I must carry.

Thank you for your consideration,

Stephen Elliott, President, COHERENCE

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