Taking the Woo Woo out of Learning to ski and Continuing Learning to Ski

Whenever I meet a new client, especially a 'never-ever', I always ask them to tell me everything they **know** about skiing – what and why and how… I listen and I engage as we start out. I am sincerely curious and I want to learn how they have made sense of things and if they think while they ski, what they think of. If they don't know, I just want to know what they are aware of, so we start skiing and I ask them to figure it out and tell me.

I explain to them that once I understand where they are at in their inner world, we can start there and I help them more…. I don't want to make assumptions, I want to learn how they make sense and move.

I had a lady once who had skied a few times. I told her to go first so I could see where she was at. I noticed that whenever she picked up speed, she would lean way in the backseat… Hmmm, why? You might think you know why she did that. Take a guess.

She stopped and I said, "It looks like you don't like to go too fast."

"That's right," she replied.

"So what are you doing to slow down?" I asked.

"Well, I am new at this and these things don't have any brakes. But I think I figured out how to slow down." (She had had a few lessons from some good instructors, but I guess nothing ever clicked about slowing down???) She continued, "I figured out that if I leaned way back on the tails of these skis, I can dig them in and they will act like a brake and slow me down."

"How is that working for you?" I asked. (I didn't tell her that she was screwed up… and I didn't laugh...)

"Not so well, but I am new at this and I am sure that if I practice it more, I will get better at it and be just fine," she replied.

That lady didn't have a fear issue, nor a balance issue… she had a making sense issue.

"Would you like to work on some other ways of slowing down?"

"Certainly!" (with a big smile)

She was ready to play with something new.

We started turning uphill whenever she felt it was too fast and before she started a new turn.

I share this story to point out how important it is that we listen to how a person is actually making sense and what they are doing, or at least think they are doing.

When we ask questions, we ask out of curiosity to really learn from them how their insides work. Then we can keep asking, suggest a few, "Have you thought of..'s" or "Have you tried or played with…"

When we see an open door that they want to try something, we then go with it. It's their door. They opened it. They will try and they will learn. We didn't "tell" them to "teach" them. They chose and they learned.

With that foundation for connecting with a a client, and facilitating learning, what technical foundational ideas will simplify skiing for them – take the woo woo out. What are the bare minimum concepts or "truths" that are necessary to lay a good foundation for skiing and learning – at all levels.

What do we have to work with? We have snow, skis and a person.

If you want to screw in a screw, you take a tool, a screwdriver. You put the tool into the head of the screw. You take your hand and turn the screwdriver. The screwdriver has a shape on the end that fits into the head of the screw. Pretty simple. Then you use the screwdriver. It works by turning, so you turn it.

Let's look at the skis as the tool.

What can you do with skis? You can point them in various directions and you can tip them on edge or flatten them, e.g. two things – point/aim and tip.

How do you work the skis? In the simplest of terms, you stand on them… The skis work by moving down the hill, gravity and you work the skis by going with them.

Basically all you have is gravity and friction… your body, on the skis… and the snow.

So, for technical simplicity, how about we take the four elements of the skills concept and the five fundamentals and boil them down three things: 1. Point or aim the skis; 2. Tip the skis and; 3. Stand/stay on the skis. Let's collapse all the details of pressure and balance from the skills and fundamentals into one idea – the person on and with the skis.

I tell my never-evers this – "Skiing is pretty simple. The ski is your tool. You use it to ski. You control the ski. All you can do with the ski is to point it in whatever direction you choose and tip it. All you have to do is to stand on them and stay with them!"

What do I want them to understand about how the ski works? It's how when it is edged, it's harder to point…

So, what do we do? With the ski in their hands, I have them hold the brake up, put the ski on the snow, keep it flat and twist it to point it or aim it in various directions. It pretty easy. Then I have them tip the ski and tell them to twist it and aim it. They find out that it's almost impossible. We have a short chat saying that if it's moving forward a bit, it will be easier to aim, but still the idea is that if they want to aim in some direction, keep it a bit flatter to make it easier.

After that basic idea of the tool, the ski, where we go next is about the person. Of course, us humans are pretty darn complex with all our joints, muscles, emotions and brains…. What is most foundational thought to using the skis? It's our lower body (below the waist to the feet, hips included -yay to freestylers!)

We want to stay in balance so we move with the skis and then we can control the skis (aim and tip). We want functional legs. We want our joints to work the way God created our bodies to work and we want to use our muscles, especially our big strong muscles such as our glutes.

So, the next sense making I want to lead a client into is "How do you use your legs? How do your legs work? Especially if you wanted to use them with some 'long' skis on your feet?"

We play with that a bit and accordion our joints as we get a little lower and stand up taller. We hop a bit. When we hop, I ask them if they were to jump off a chair or a step, would they land with their back arched or let it round a bit. I want them to realize that to protect their back, they had better not try to keep it arched.

We chat a bit about balance means over our feet – even when skiing and feet our more to the side, we are still, in the forces, lined up over them for balance. I tell them that they have learned how to balance since they were babies and learned how to walk. They know what balance feels like. Out of balance is a warning signal – danger, danger, get back in balance.

Then I have them look down at their knees as we bend. The knee is a hinge joint and it works best when the hips are lined up with the feet, not twisted (in ski instructor terms, not countered to the feet). I have them twist, rotate, their hips relative to their feet and then bend while twisted, looking at their knees. You can't get the knees to bend the same with your hips twisted – so moral of that story is that if you want to not hurt your knees and have them work the way they were designed to work, keep your hips coming around with and going in the same direction as your feet!

One last fundamental concept and the foundation is laid. The last main idea is that we want to control the skis and do that we need to stay in balance with the skis… so what helps us stay in balance, with the skis? I often refer to a skateboard. Even if they don't skateboard, everyone knows that if you put the skateboard on the ground and stand on it while it's rolling, if you lean backwards, you fall off of it instead of going with it… So how do you stay with your skis while they go downhill – How do you stay in balance (a good feeling), so you can stay in control (also a good feeling), you go with them - even though at first, that may be counterintuitive.

In skiing, we go down the hill with our skis and we make turns. To anchor this concept, once again, we **do** something while we talk. I have us all stand with our feet across the hill (skis off). "Jump down the hill, sideways, off of one foot. Which foot is easier to go down the hill." I make sure they try it off of each foot to really anchor the idea – if you want to make a turn and go with your skis, it's works best to start with more weight on your new outside, alias uphill, foot/ski.

You might critique me and say, "How do you expect them to know how to put more weight on their uphill foot?" Good question. When we are playing with our mini squats and little hops in our boots, we also play with more on one foot or more on the other foot or even on both feet. I often point out that simply by lifting one foot or just even taking a bit weight off of it, it is automatically puts weight on the other foot."

Note to ourselves: Yes, there are times when we actually push, or pressure, one foot by extending one leg more, however, most of the time, transferring of weight foot to foot is simply by bending one leg, pulling one foot a bit closer to our butt, "picking it up a bit more".

Then for the beginners, one last admonition is that "fast", scary, is aiming down the hill, "slow and stop" is across the hill… We then play with this.

Another note to seasoned instructors: Have you ever noticed how many intermediates and even some advanced skier (or even beginners) brace on their outside leg at the bottom of a turn by extending it and pushing pretty hard? We often call it the "stiff downhill leg syndrome". They usually do that to brake, to slow down. It's really hard to start a new turn from that position and when they finally do, they are not moving down the hill with their skis, so as they turn, their skis get ahead of them, they end up in the backseat, can't steer them very well and then brace of that extended leg, trying to slow down again…

Helping them learn to slow down by turning uphill, then, moving into the new turn from their new outside like, staying in balance, which allows them to control the skis more easily to slow down, eliminating their stiff downhill leg syndrome.

It's pretty simple. All you can do with the ski is to aim it and tip it. You want to stay with it and control it - balance on it. Your knees are mainly a hinge joint, so keep your hips lined up with your feet. Let your back round and start to turn downhill with a bit more weight on your uphill foot… and slow down by turning across or even up the hill.