

Skinner Releasing Technique:

Imagery and its Application to Movement Training

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The image as described by Suzanne Langer is a "mental picture of something; ... a symbol; an embodiment...a vivid representation,"¹ which "formulates a new conception for our direct imaginative grasp."² Thus, the image has great potential to communicate nonverbal information such as kinesthetic data. The use of imagery is also extremely effective in movement training. For example, imagery is helpful when we are orienting ourselves in space, as motor, kinesthetic, and visual inputs must be quickly integrated.³ An image makes possible the simultaneous processing of diffuse inputs.

Simultaneous integration involves an intuitive rather than an intellectual apprehension. Intuition is used here in the sense that the Italian psychiatrist, Robert Assaglioli, uses it in his book, *Psychosynthesis*:

"We will consider intuition mainly in its cognitive function, i.e., as a psychic organ or means to apprehend reality. It is a synthetic function in the sense that it apprehends the totality of a given situation or psychological reality. It does not work from part to whole -- as the analytical mind does -- but apprehends a totality directly in its living existence."⁴

Thus, in the Skinner Releasing Technique the image serves as the carrier of a patterned whole of information -- a metaphor for kinesthetic knowledge -- which "formulates a new conception for our direct imaginative grasp," and this metaphor is apprehended intuitively rather than analytically.

The physiology of movement further underscored the use of the intuitive mode in kinesthetic training since much of the mechanics of movement are unconscious and not immediately subject to the control of the analytical mind. According to Mabel Ellsworth Todd, author of *The Thinking Body*, movement is more subject to mental pictures than to conscious direction. She explains:

"When doing exercises under instruction we are apt to think that we move or direct the moving of muscles. What actually happens is that we get a picture from the teacher's words or his movements and the appropriate action takes place within our bodies to reproduce the picture. The result is successful in proportion to our power of interpretation and amount of experience, but most of all perhaps the desire to do. In any case, the final response is automatic and not the result of any consciously directed movement of particular muscles. It is the result of a combination of reflexes, no one of which can be selected as in itself 'causing movement' or patterns of movement."⁵

The use of imagery in kinesthetic training has been corroborated by the work of Dr. Lulu E. Sweigard of the Dance Department at the Julliard School of Music in New York City. She discovered that movement training is not dependent on movement per se. When the students are motionless, if they are working with appropriate images, they are still engaged in an intense movement learning activity. In her article "Psychomotor Function as Correlated with Body Mechanics and Posture," Dr. Sweigard concluded that imagined movement is the most effective means for education of the neuromuscular system:

"Mental activity, then, especially that in which the thought of movement is involved, is the most effective means employed thus far to recondition neuromuscular action patterns in the body. Such mental activity can be encouraged in a variety of ways. The key to each, however, is, mental imagery, that is, visualization of an imaginary situation. Teaching can and should proceed in a manner which will lead the student to think in terms of concrete images. As this is achieved, image-directed muscular responses tend to occur. When no voluntary aid is given by the subject (i.e. any physical effort or movement), concentration on a mental image promotes a coordination of muscle action whose resultant is the line of action of forces at play in the imagined situation."⁶

If students attempt voluntary control they only "impose their own neuromuscular habits on the movement. This imposition interferes with the changes that can be made in muscular coordination just through imagined action."⁷

Dr. Sweigard points out that trying to place or force the body into a given position, i.e., tuck the hips under, pull the stomach in, only "results in a corresponding deviation of some other part or parts of the structure in accordance with the pattern of muscular limitation of free movement in the joints ...It accounts for many of the faults of position and movement which plague the dancer."⁸

As Ms. Skinner realized the effectiveness of imagery in movement training, she found it necessary to establish a learning environment where the dancer's technical growth becomes a creative process of individual discovery.

The Pedagogy of Imagery

The pedagogy of images in the Skinner Releasing Technique serves as a structure of metaphors for kinesthetic experiences. Skill with image forming grows with practice. We select imagery carefully according to the student's level.

The images at the basic level fall into two categories: specific and totality imagery. Specific imagery is concerned with segmented movement patterns, while totality imagery cultivates an overall state in which an integration of multidimensional awarenesses is realized. An example of a specific is the image of marionette stings at the knees. This image is designed to allow greater freedom in the hip socket.

An example of a totality is the image of floating in a pool. Then the whole self merges with the pool -- the outer edges of the self becoming the outer edges of the pool. At times the specific string image is integrated within the pool totality.

Students eventually can become so captured by the totality that its environment becomes real -- so real that the feeling state evoked by the image is experienced as another reality.

These feeling states should not be confused with dramatic interpretations of the images. Rather, they are experienced more as an immersion or complete identification with the imagery. "Feeling state" is used in the sense that Suzanne Langer speaks of it. It denotes all that can be felt "from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement, repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling tones of a conscious human life."⁹

In working with totalities a certain loss of orientation is often experienced. This loss of orientation gives the opportunity of a fresh, unconditional response which allows new kinesthetic patterns of muscle use to emerge. Once these patterns are experienced, they automatically begin to be absorbed into the individual's kinesthetic functioning.

In the Skinner Releasing Technique, contrary to many dance techniques, no one stationary center of balance is used. Joan Skinner writes: "Balancing on two feet becomes a multi-directional, multi-dimensional experience in space. There is not, as found in traditional methods, a singular reference point for balancing, such as a set of muscles, a particular center of the body, or a concept of upness and downness. (In a space age, there is no up or down.)"¹⁰

Balance is also viewed as a dynamic process since shifts of weight cause shifts in actual centers of balance. This view is analogous to the implication of Einstein's theory of relativity which advises the scientist to stop looking for any absolute, stationary frame-of-reference in the universe. The only constant is change.

In Professor Skinner's exploration, she discovered that excess tension is the most common cause of inability to realize the Releasing principles. The twentieth-century person exhibits a variety of tension patterns: hands are gripped, breathing is held, jaws are clenched, shoulders are hunched. The list of tension patterns and tension diseases is long. Excess tension can cause idiosyncratic alignment problems, constricted breathing and inflexibility. In the Skinner Releasing Technique, the student kinesthetically releases patterns of excess tension in order to realize principles of multidirectional alignment and balance.

The imagery conveys a sense of effortlessness in moving -- of being moved rather than commanding or making movement. Instead of moving with an underlying conception that force is needed to defy gravity, inertia, and friction, the students operate with the conception that other forces support or propel them through movement.

When students have realized the Releasing principles, they can unleash greater power, speed, and intensity of movement with the appearance of less overt effort than would be expected. Also, they can move suddenly with no apparent preparation, just as a snake strikes without warning. At the same time, subtle nuances can be expressed through the movement with inordinate clarity. To describe the appearance of people trained in the Skinner Releasing Technique, Professor Skinner writes:

"Ideally, movement seems to be more skeletal than muscular. The muscles appear to be lengthened and wrapped around the bones rather than contracted or gripped. The joints give the appearance of having space in them and the limbs of being unbound though belonging to the torso. There is a suspended relationship to gravity which can be likened to the suspension of a dust particle in a shaft of sunlight."¹¹

The Nature of the Releasing Process and Its Aesthetic Impact

Paradoxically, one of the most difficult aspects of the Skinner Releasing Technique to describe is the concept of "releasing" itself. The concept of Releasing encompasses more than letting go of fixed points of muscular tension. It also implies a simultaneous allowing of new movement to emerge. As Professor Skinner says, "One releases immediate fixed states of being to become available to the aligning process. In turn, the aligning process releases psychophysical energy." The release of tension, of distorted alignment is, in effect, a release of perceptions, of preconceived ideas, of psychophysical habits which are manifested in alignment. In order to participate in the aligning process, one releases the tyranny of conscious control, of the intellect and of preconceived ideas to experience the natural laws of movement as they apply to the human organism. When one becomes more harmoniously aligned with these laws, a new wellbeing and freedom are realized.

As implied by the above, the premise that mind and body are somehow separate is discarded in Releasing. Instead, Joan Skinner uses the following metaphor:

"The human organism is seen not as a mind-body duality, but as a dynamic network of energies. The network is totally unified, yet within it are complex, diverse autonomous patterns and forms of energy. Although there are reverberations within the network of energies, there is no linear pattern of cause and effect."¹²

In addition to the letting go of conscious control, intellectualization, and preconceived ideas, the Releasing process frees the imagination. Students do not simply absorb by rote the images that are given in class; they often experience images which come to them spontaneously. These images arise seemingly of their own accord, and yet they can be very much in tune with the individual's kinesthetic make-up and the Releasing principles being studied. Even at the first presentation of an image by the teacher, the student spontaneously experiences a personalized version. These personal images emerge as metaphors of the principles the student is working with at that time. In a way, the imagination can be said to be actively improvising on the images that are given, making them relevant to the needs of the student's process at any given moment.

When the imagination is tapped in this way, students are carried into their own creative learning process, one change giving birth to another. In this sense, the Releasing technique becomes a self-propelling aesthetic process. Image work itself is a creative undertaking. Immersion in a totality, for example, can be a profound aesthetic experience. This impact is lucidly explained by Suzanne Langer in her description of the aesthetic experience:

"What it does is formulate our conceptions of feeling and our conceptions of visual, factual and audible reality together. It gives us forms of imagination, and forms of feeling, inseparably; that is to say, it clarifies and organizes intuition itself... Aesthetic intuition seizes the greatest form, and therefore, the main import, at once."¹³

Thus when a student becomes the image, its dynamic form is experienced. In this way, the image forming process develops the student's aesthetic sensibility.

When students reach the point where they are self-propelled through a dynamic process of change within the context of Releasing principles, when they are relatively free from the interference of intellect and prejudice, when their immersion in image work is total, students are "working in process." Thereafter, they need less moment-to-moment guidance because their own process has taken over. When dancers are working in process, they have a sense of being danced rather than performing the dance. Personal idiosyncracies and affectations disappear, leaving only the dance. When this state of transparency is realized, the awareness of one's dancing is no longer experienced as a dialogue between consciousness and the body, but rather as an expression of the psychophysical unity of the dancer. As one student observed earlier, "rather than trying to perceive things, you become the perception..."

Another writes: "I feel purer and more complete movement today while spinning and letting the spinning move me so that I can travel with it... Letting the movements do you rather than you doing the movements... I can feel the spinning take me over as I ease out of the picture, and leave only the spinning."

An analogy can be made to the Zen painter's experience when "the hand that guides the brush has already caught and executed what floated before the mind at the same moment the mind began to form it, and in the end, the pupil no longer knows which of the two -- mind or hand -- was responsible for the work."¹⁴

In the aesthetic of the Skinner Releasing Technique, the absence of affectation is considered a fundamental attribute of a fine dancer in the sense that movement is not dependent on "personality" or stylization. The energy lies not in the dancer making the movement, but in the nature of the movement itself. When dancing comes out of a state of psychophysical unity and is beyond premeditation, it is transparent to the spirit of each movement and to the unique spirit of the mover. Then the dance reverberates through the body as unobstructed as music vibrates through the instrument.

While dance has been a focal point in the evolution of Releasing, it has gradually become clear that the work has much broader applications, many of which have scarcely been tapped, such as healing, sports skills, psychotherapy, voice and more. Even in the field of dance, we find that the technique constantly changes and grows, revealing more that we do not yet know. Consequently, while Releasing itself is a dynamic process of changes, the teaching of the Skinner Releasing Technique is in a constant state of evolution as well -- but such is the nature of all process, of all vital life.

Notes

1. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (College Edition; New York: World Publishing Company, 1960), p. 805.
2. Suzanne Langer, *Problems of Art* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1957), P. 23.
3. Robert E Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1972), P. 79.
4. Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 217.
5. Mabel Ellsworth Todd, *The Thinking Body* (2nd Edition; New York: Dance Horizons, Inc., 1972), p. 33. See also Pamela Matt, Mabel Ellsworth Todd and Barbara Clark: *Principles, Practise, and the Import for Dance*, (unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1973).
6. Lulu E. Sweigard, "Psychomotor Function as Correlated with Body Mechanics and Posture," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Ser. 2, Vol. II (May 1949), p. 246.
7. (), "The Dancer's Posture", *Impulse* (San Francisco: Impulse Publications, Inc., 1971), p. 38.
8. *Ibid*, p. 417-42.
9. Suzanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art*, p. 15.
10. Joan Skinner, "An Organic Approach to the Training of Dancers and the Aesthetic Education of the Layman" (unpublished essay, 1969).
11. Joan Skinner, notes to the author, February, 1974.
12. (), notes to the author, January, 1974.
13. Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 397.
14. Eugene Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 63.