

you can't make a leaf grow by stretching it

I am by nature a cynic. I am the personification of a logical deductive thinker. I was brought up with a tremendous work ethic. I spent 10 years and thousands of pounds on two classes a day, pilates, the gym, sports science diplomas, Feldenkrais and Alexander lessons. I even let myself be hypnotised once in an attempt to improve my pirouettes, but I don't think I really engaged with the kinaesthetic experience of dancing until I came across Joan Skinner's work.

Joan Skinner is based in Seattle and has been developing and teaching her technique for thirty years. She distinguishes her work by specifically calling it Skinner Releasing Technique and by certifying the teachers she trains.

Skinner Releasing Technique is an approach to movement concerned with the integration of the whole self to foster a deeper kinaesthetic experience of movement. It is called releasing rather than release as this better describes the process nature of the work, a work which understands learning to be holographic rather than linear. As with other techniques it develops increased strength, flexibility, and freedom of movement but it does not use repetition of a specific movement (exercise) to do this. In fact there is no need to try and push the body beyond its limits, no adherence to a principle of overload as a necessary tool. The belief is in precisely the opposite - You can't make a leaf grow by stretching it.

This has implications for us as a dance community concerned with training healthier dancers. While we are all busily spending time in the gym to make ourselves stronger we are often concentrating only on one half of the problem - building up muscle fibre - when in fact there are two of the body's systems in play - muscles and nerves. By releasing excess tension throughout the whole self Skinner Releasing re-educates the neuromuscular system as a whole. The resulting increase in efficiency enables the muscles to have less resistance to overcome and by releasing energy the technique ultimately gives us more resources with which to work. Releasing can also have an impact on our levels of endurance, for endurance is hampered as much by our inefficiency as by any other factor affecting our aerobic capacity. Excess tension wears us out and holding patterns in our breathing quite literally render us out of breath when we would otherwise have the stamina to continue.

It must be applauded that nowadays so many teachers of all techniques have a better understanding of anatomy and physiology than was the norm a generation ago. Indeed since so much of the dance training in Britain is still based on young dancers increasing their range by always working just beyond their present limits this is vital for their safety. However many dancers and teachers misinterpret their understanding of biomechanics and sports science to justify ever more overload. More overload is no solution.

The training in the gym, the pilates studio and even the traditional dance class is highly specific. It prepares us only in that specific activity and since, unlike athletes, what we do when we perform is not highly specific but in fact very varied we can not rely on sports science to ensure our safety. Because releasing works through integration not overload its strength and flexibility gains are longer term and less activity specific.

While it might be easy to grasp the logic of this it is often harder for us to accept a philosophy which requires no overload, no repetition of a specific exercise to strengthen or stretch a specific muscle, no pushing of ourselves beyond our immediate limitations, to make change. Most dancers, like myself, have invested much effort over many years of training virtually believing that no pain means no gain. The situation is not helped by the fact that Skinner Releasing is not even couched in terms of gain. It is about process.

The very nature of the releasing process presents a hurdle in a more widespread understanding of Skinner's work within the dance community since in many ways it is difficult to discuss in linear or scientific terms.

Skinner Releasing is concerned with integration and therefore our mind does not direct. We does not imagine Joan's images we merge with them, they become another reality. We experience them at a level just beyond our conscious control. The student is prepared for the image through a step by step letting go checklist which guides them into a state more receptive to it. The images are poetic - Skinner likens them to Haikus - and metaphorical in nature. They represent the kinaesthetic experience which underlies them rather than describing anatomy. In fact they are not single images but are more image clusters as there may be several layers and aspects to them. They might suggest movement (these are called image actions) or be designed to lead us into a deeper state (totalities).

Joan Skinner made her discoveries kinaesthetically, without academic reference either to anatomy or to the energetic nature of the work of the New Physicists (of whom she was not even aware at the time) but her discoveries and theirs run parallel and interlink. Releasing alignment is multi directional and dimensional which implies suspension rather than support and therefore there is no up or down nor no fixed centre of gravity. The multi dimensional nature of balance makes it dynamic as opposed to something to hold on to. This kinaesthetic experience relates to the scientific notion that we are, ultimately, a psycho - physical system of energies - an energy system within the larger energy systems of the universe. Physicists are concerned with aligning themselves with a larger entity than themselves. Releasing dancers do not necessarily concern themselves intellectually with this philosophy whilst in the act of dancing but they *experience* it. They experience it when they experience suspension and multi directional balance, they experience it when they merge with an image and discover that they are being danced rather than directing the dance.

A wider understanding of what releasing means has implications for the current move towards a healthier dancer. Skinner Releasing does not mean an aimless free for all in spite of the freedom for the individual to explore at his or her own pace. It is not without alignment and scientific principle even though the images are indirect and not necessarily anatomical in nature. Indeed Skinner Releasing Technique forms a highly organised pedagogy. The primary function of the pedagogy is not choreographic or therapeutic but since it deals with integration its effect can be nourishing on many levels. It does not however need to adhere to a principle of overload to increase a dancer's freedom of movement.

Releasing is aesthetic, poetic and holographic and it has the power to reveal what it is to experience dancing - or rather to experience being danced. In Eastern philosophy an alignment with universal forces has been a concern for many centuries. Here in the West we have embraced the Cartesian perspective of *I think therefore I am* and the mind / body split that it implies. As dancers we are artists and therefore perhaps we ought to trust poetry a little more. Perhaps it is time for those of us with a cynical nature and a habit of deductive reasoning to embrace a new approach - *I experience therefore I dance*.

Kirsty Alexander is the Assistant Director of London Contemporary Dance School. She is also a performer, choreographer and certified teacher of Skinner Releasing Technique.

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