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Buddhist Mindfulness and Psychophysical Performance

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Part One: A short introductory statement on modern theatre and Buddhism.

Franc Chamberlain.

This is a very brief introductory sketch of some historical and cultural context for the relationship between Buddhism and western theatre practices in the early 20th century. As we've been asked to make sure that our presentation requires little specialist knowledge of our field, I will be simplifying and there will inevitably be important omissions and, perhaps some over-generalizations but, I hope, no fundamental errors.

Whether or not Nietzsche's madman was correct in his assertion that God was dead (in *The Gay Science* 1882 and *Thus spoke Zarathustra* 1885) Christianity in Europe and the US was losing some of its institutional and moral power towards the latter half of the nineteenth century. This decline led to a greater openness towards other religions and the growth of new, and a return to old, alternative spiritual traditions. These included Spiritualism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Hermeticism and Alchemy as well as an interest in Hinduism, Taoism, Shinto and, not least, various Buddhist philosophies and practices.

Artists in the west were very much involved in these matters of spirituality from the late 19th century onwards and this is as true of the theatre as it was of painting, poetry, music and literature. New plays by writers such as Maeterlinck posed difficult problems for contemporary actors, essentially because they emphasized non-action and listening over theatricality. The Swedish playwright, August Strindberg, wrote that he thought that Maeterlinck's plays were 'unstageable' unless the actors were prepared to go through an intense process of transformation which he called the 'Inferno' (a process of alchemical purification) (Strindberg, 1967 p.301).

The celebrated Russian teacher of acting and co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky struggled to stage the new dramas, and this eventually led to his establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre Studio under the leadership of Leopold Sulerzhitsky. It was Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky's aim to create a 'spiritual order of actors' (Stanislavsky, 1980 p. 537). Stanislavsky

and Sulerzhitsky's psychophysical approach drew on their understanding of contemplative techniques, generally understood to mean yoga.

Stanislavsky's work became known in the US through two former members of the Moscow Art Theatre Studio Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya who founded the American Laboratory Theatre and its school the Theatre Arts Institute in 1923. But the most influential proponent of Stanislavsky's approach in the US was their student Lee Strasberg with what became known as 'Method-Acting' (exemplified by actors such as Marlon Brando, Jane Fonda, Al Pacino, and Ellen Burstyn). To put things crudely, Strasberg emphasized the emotion memory aspects of Stanislavsky's work.

In an article in 1976, William H Wegner¹ noted that the importance of Yoga for Stanislavsky's work was being overlooked, even though at least some passing reference to it was made in key critical studies in the 1950s and 1960s. Wegner's concern was probably a reference to Strasberg's entry on Stanislavsky from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1957 where Strasberg mentioned the importance of experimental psychology for Stanislavsky but not Yoga. Stanislavsky's avowedly spiritual project was being occluded.

More recently, American scholars such as Andrew White (2006), Sharon Carnicke (1998/2009) and Phillip Zarrilli (2009) have picked up on this neglect of Yoga in studies of Stanislavsky and have noted the importance of the work of the American author William Walker Atkinson, *aka* Yogi Ramacharaka. Stanislavsky was introduced to Ramacharaka's books on both Hatha and Raja Yoga in 1911.

Stanislavsky's interest in Yoga and its relationship to the work of Ramacharaka had been marginalized but in the process of bringing it to centre stage, Carnicke, White and Zarrilli have accidentally marginalized something else that Wegner pointed to in his 1976 article: Stanislavsky's interest in Buddhism.

According to Fovitzky's 1923 study of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky's interest in Buddhism dated back to at least 1906. During a performance of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, in which he was playing Dr Astrof, Stanislavsky's mind began to wander; he found himself thinking about a conversation that he'd had in between the acts.

As Fovitzky put it: "This slip of attention set him [Stanislavsky] to work to discover methods for the preventing of one's thus going out of the circle of creative imagination on the stage. He

¹ This extract from a much longer paper is heavily indebted to Wegner's work.

[Stanislavsky] found a hint in the practices of the wise men of the Buddhist tradition – and thenceforth required his actors to practice long psychophysical exercises as a means of cultivating concentration of attention” (Fovitzky, 1923 p.42; *see also* Wegner, 1976 p.85).

Stanislavsky was later to say that his whole system was based on teaching the student the art of self-observation founded on correct breathing, correct posture, ‘concentration and watchful discrimination’ – and that everything was based on the breath (see Wegner, 1976 p.86-7).

Wegner linked this emphasis on the breath to exercises in mindfulness of breathing and specifically refers to Nyanaponika Thera’s *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, which wasn’t published until the 1950s. More apposite is Wegner’s quotation of Huntly Carter’s comment (from 1929) on Evgeny Vakhtangov (another of Stanislavsky’s protégés at the Moscow Art Theatre): “His contribution to radical ideas probably came from Tibet. He was interested in Tibetan mysteries...and he based his system of acting on yoga practices” (quoted in Wegner, 1976 p.88).

Wegner follows this statement with an extract from Carter’s fellow Theosophist, W.Y. Evans-Wentz’s *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* from 1935:

These three arts, namely the yogic posturing of the body [...] the yogic disciplining and right directing of the breathing processes [...] and the yogic mastery of the thought processes arouse in the yogin psychic virtues which shield him from worldly distractions and undesirable influences and bestow upon him soundness of physical, mental, and spiritual health. Therefore they are called ‘The Protective Circle’ (Evans-Wentz, 1967 p.177n).

The importance of posture, breath, and control of thought processes noted by Evans-Wentz does sound very close to Stanislavsky’s correct posture, correct breathing, and concentration and watchful discrimination mentioned above. And the ‘Protective Circle’ seems to be akin to Stanislavsky’s famous, famous in the theatre world at least, Circles of Attention (also see Wegner, 1976).

In Stanislavsky’s great book on acting, *An Actor’s Work*, which tells the story of the process of actor-training through the eyes of a young student Kostya, these ‘protective circles of attention are discussed in some detail. Very early on in his training, Kostya steps out onto the main stage for the first time:

As soon as I stepped onto the acting area I was confronted by the gaping hole of the proscenium arch and beyond it a boundless, deep, dark void. [...] Somewhere out there [...] a bulb glowed under a lamp-shade. Its light fell on a sheaf of papers on a table. Hands were preparing to note down all our faults with ‘no quarter given’... I felt as though I was being swallowed by the void (Stanislavsky, 2008 p.10).

The next day Kostya has a slightly different experience: ““I marched downstage and stared at the ominous black hole so as to get used to it and free myself from the draw of the auditorium. But the more I tried to ignore it, the more I thought about it, the greater the draw from the ominous blackness beyond the picture-frame became. At that moment the stagehand, who had come up beside me, dropped some nails. I started to help him pick them up. And suddenly I felt fine, almost at home on the vast stage. But once the nails had all been picked up, and my good natured companion had gone, once again I felt threatened by the hole, and once again I felt as though I was being sucked into it” (Stanislavsky, 2008 p.10-11).

Kostya, and his fellow students have several more difficult experiences, being unable to stay present in the moment and stay focused on their tasks. I mentioned earlier that new plays at the beginning of the twentieth century by writers such as Maeterlinck posed difficult problems for contemporary actors, essentially because they emphasized non-action and listening over theatricality. Kostya and his colleagues are unable to just be present onstage: they fidget and pose and even the simplest action becomes over-elaborated. They are far too concerned about the director and the critics and don't give enough attention to their scene partners.

Tortsov, the fictionalized version of Stanislavsky in his pedagogical aspect, says:

“In time we shall come back to this exercise and learn how to sit onstage’
‘Learn just to sit?’ the students cried in amazement. ‘But we did sit...’
‘No,’ Tortsov declared firmly, ‘you didn’t just sit’” (Stanislavsky, 2008 p.39).

In order to help the students maintain their concentration on the stage, he starts with a point of attention. The students can do it when there is just a small lamp onstage, but when they have a number of objects to choose from they find it more difficult and Tortsov tells them they need to learn to look and see and listen and hear on stage. When they attempt to pay attention to an object they become tense and Tortsov tells them they have to do less, much less, in fact 95% less (Stanislavsky, 2008 p.94).

From points of attention, near, mid-distance, far, Tortsov/Stanislavsky moves on to Circles of Attention, like the characters in the Three Billy Goats Gruff they are: small circle of attention; medium circle of attention and the large (or big) circle of attention. The actor keeps her attention on the circumference of the circle and, if she feels unable to keep her attention, she shrinks it to a size that she can manage.

The aim of the circles of attention is both to protect the actors from the ‘deep dark void’ and to assist them to maintain their concentration and attention on the objects and people within the circle.

Although Tortsov initially created the circles literally with pools of light, the goal is for the actor to visualize these circles by using her imagination.

It is possible that Stanislavsky knew of Evans-Wentz's work. It is also possible that Vakhtangov had some knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist practices. But it is also the case that it is very difficult to separate out all of the forms of contemplative practice that were finding their way into actor training from 1900 onwards and have continued into the 21st – if not always acknowledged for what they are.

Part Two: Secular Sacredness and the Spiritual Warrior

Deborah Middleton

I am now going to turn to two more recent examples of theatre practices, both of which have been heavily influenced by Buddhism.

In 2010 I spent a sabbatical at Naropa University working with Prof. Lee Worley who teaches a form of theatre training developed by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Trungpa developed Mudra Space Awareness in the 1970s in response to the requests by theatre people within his community; and for a while Trungpa himself pursued a vision of a contemplative theatre form for which he also wrote playtexts².

Mudra Space Awareness is understood to have been developed by Trungpa from his early experiences as a young lama learning and then teaching the *Chakrasamvara* dance of the Surmang monastery in Tibet (Worley, 2010 p. 122; Trungpa, 1966 p. 92-93). This is a vajrayana practice which functions as a meditation in movement, and takes the form of a mandala. Trungpa relates the Chakrasamvara Dance to 'hatha yoga' practice, and notes that it is much slower than other Tibetan monastic dances. Although there is a fast version, Trungpa says this is "competing with a cloud, you know, you are not moving at all... It's more like movement dance, more connected with tai chi or something like that than the traditional dance which is jumpy and very fast." (Worley, 2010 p.96-97)

In developing Mudra Space Awareness, Trungpa did not keep the physical choreography or vocabulary of the forms, but instead developed, from principles, a series of fairly static postures

² This section of the paper draws heavily on personal correspondence with Lee Worley, as well two publications: her 2001 book, *Coming from Nothing*, and the unpublished *Mudra Space Awareness: Selected Readings* (2010), a course book used in Prof. Worley's teaching at Naropa.

with associated embodied visualizations. Essential to the practice is the heightened experience of form and space. 'Mudra' here means 'symbol'. In teaching, Worley uses the slogan 'You are your own Mudra' and writes,

Just as Mahamudra is the sign or symbol or seal of things as they are, you are a mini-mudra just as you are: empty yet appearing, appearing yet empty. Mudra practice trains you to know and acknowledge this. (Worley, 2010 p.56)

As I describe Mudra Space Awareness, we can see my colleague Karoliina Sandström³ demonstrating the first two stages of the practice (*video playing under what follows*).

There are six stages in total, divided into two sets: the first set is considered to relate to shamatha and the second to vipashyana meditation. (There are also exercises for voice and eyes, work with poles and objects, and an exercise called 'Presence of Being'. Mudra Space Awareness is always performed in a group, and is led by a guide known as a 'Shadow' who precisely times each phase of the exercise, and vocally leads the practitioners through an embodied visualisation (Worley 2010, pp.58 - 71).

This is 'Intensification of Space'. Essentially, the practitioner learns to 'intensify', i.e., engage isometric activation of the muscles in a progressive and sustained manner. Such a practice brings the practitioner into an intimate and enhanced awareness of her own 'mudra' on the physical plane. At a given signal, all intensification will be released and the practitioner will be guided to immediately stand and walk 'aimlessly' in the space. Once intensification has been mastered, practitioners are taught to go as far in releasing muscular activity as they went in engaging it. The initial relaxation of effort is pursued into greater and greater degrees of release. For Trungpa, "in order to learn how to relate to space with ease and grace we have to learn to intensify the body as much as possible." (Worley 2010, p. 60)

Sandström is now demonstrating the second exercise, 'Intensification of the Limbs', involving a different visualisation, and a different pattern of intensification, this time beginning at the fingertips.

Trungpa said of Mudra Space Awareness, that it was "...not so much to learn how to act, but learn how to redo our existence in order to learn to exist. That we do exist, that we have to start with the

³ Karoliina Sandström is an Associate Member of the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research at the University of Huddersfield. She is Artistic Director of Espacio Kuu in Mexico City and a close collaborator with Nicolás Núñez. She demonstrates Mudra Space Awareness, here, under my direction.

backbone, the spinal cord, and the space closing in, that we can only exist in the midst of space."
(Worley 2010, p.5)

Trungpa's theatre training is a pre-expressive exploration of fundamental elements, space and form, from which the practitioner develops a new sense of 'being', of presence. And in Worley's work these starting points - space, presence, emptiness, being - become the actor's source of spontaneity and creativity.

I'd like to turn now to the Mexican theatre director, Nicolás Núñez, with whom I've been working since 1993. In 1986, Núñez, who had worked closely with the seminal Polish director, Jerzy Grotowski and who would the following year publish *Teatro Antropocómico*⁴ spent a year in Dharamsala at the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts where he studied Tibetan performance and learned the Black Hat dance of the Tashi Lhumpo monastery, called *Lha-lhung Pay-dor* (Núñez 1996, p.11). The dance, performed in a circle, depicts an allegory in which a warrior frees a village from tyranny, by killing "the bad king or the ego...." (Núñez 1996, p.11).

Núñez recognized this as a 'Warrior' dance in the same spirit as the Conchero 'warrior' dances of Mexico, seeing both forms as 1) meditation in motion; 2). "a type of mandala in motion which charges the performer with energy" and 3) practices in which the performer is allegorically a warrior, fighting an inner battle, striving to maintain attention in the "here and now" (from Núñez 1996, p.12).

Those of you familiar with Trungpa's work will know that Trungpa also developed the ancient Tibetan tradition of the spiritual warrior through his work on 'Shambhala' (Trungpa 1984). Nunez was not familiar with Trungpa's writings on Shambhala at the time of his own independent identification and development of Spiritual Warrior work.

With the express permission of HH the Dalai Lama, and that of the Mexican Conchero authorities, Nunez created an hour-long form in which the choreography of the Black Hat dance was situated alongside a sequence of Conchero steps (see Middleton 2001: pp. 54 – 56).

On the video, we can now see some of the Tibetan steps demonstrated by Karoliina (*video shows Sandström demonstrating some sections of the Tibetan choreography*).

⁴ Nicolás Núñez (1987) *Teatro Antropocómico: El rito en la dinámica teatral*, Mexico: Árbol Editorial. For the English translation, see Núñez 1997.

Unlike Trungpa, Núñez was working with the 'jumpy' kind of Tibetan dance, and he did maintain the body alphabet or choreography. The two scores - one, the Tibetan, characterized by flowing arm gestures, hops and balances and light, fast movements; the other, the Mexican, characterized by stamping and dancing feet and the beat of rattles and shell anklets - sit side by side in a pattern of repetitions. Neither dance is interfered with; each maintains its own psychophysical integrity. Costumes are dispensed with, but the body alphabet, the internal use of mantra, and the vibratory quality of each dance is maintained. In the Mexican dance, vibration is created by the rattles and ayayotes; in the Tibetan, the bone trumpets are replaced by a vocal sounding of the syllable 'Hu'⁵.

It is interesting to look at the kind of understanding of the actor and the theatre that emerges from the influence of Buddhism. These two forms of actor training, which draw directly and specifically from Tibetan Buddhist monastic dance, each maintain meditation-in-movement in the context of the notion of the secular Spiritual Warrior. These are both forms that see the work of the actor-in-training as a profound deconditioning and reconditioning of the psychophysical material of the individual.

Part Three: *How to Tame the Wind*

Daniel Plá

I have been working this field of theatre and mindfulness since 2003 at the State University of Campinas. At that moment I was studying Tibetan Buddhist ritual, linked to Tara – Tara is the female aspect of the enlightened mind. I was very interested in a kind of brightness of presence that I could see in the long-term practitioners of the ritual. I was wondering at that time if that kind of presence was related in some sense to the actor's presence on stage. Aiming at that, I started to observe the body of those practitioners, trying to catch the principles and procedures. During the time of the research I could see that this presence is not something related only to the body, or the use of the body, but also to a kind of mind training. So, that presence in the ritual came from the use of the body but also from the training of attention; how the practitioners could use the ritual as a meditation. I started to become curious about how this mind training could affect the actor; how this

⁵ To see documentation of *Citalmina* being practised at the *Taller de Investigación*, Mexico, see <https://www.hud.ac.uk/research/researchcentres/cppr/projects/nunezarchive/dynamics/>

kind of mind training could bring new perspectives for actors' training. And with these questions I went to the PhD that I started in 2006.

My PhD thesis was named *How to Tame the Wind: Contributions of Meditation to the Actor's Training*. So, I started to focus my practice in meditation; I started to meditate – a lot! And also to study philosophical texts that were the basis of that practice, especially *shamatha* practice; that is, the basis of mindfulness practice. In this way I worked with a group in 2010, and during the whole year we used some psychophysical techniques, such as yoga and tai chi, as training, trying through these techniques to develop more attention capacity. [*Sound of overtone chanting from video*].

So we started to work on that and we finished the year with a performance named *The Box* [*video images of performance*] where we had a lot of mention of Tibetan traditions and also of some concepts from Buddhist philosophy, especially impermanence and death. In 2012, I started another work as a performer, and this work was named *The Yatra*. I presented it in 2013 [*video images of performance in outdoor location*], and it is a performance where I use walking meditation during a period of time in a very busy street; so in that performance I used also some references to Tibetan Buddhism, such as the bell and the colours of my clothes.

But now in 2014, we are working with a new group. How does training become a way of self-knowledge? [*video images of a group training together in a studio*]. Not in the sense of some New Age theories – it's not like that - but how training can bring us more consciousness, about us and about our reality, including social reality. What is our responsibility as artists? How can we affect society with our actions? It's not something political – it's not like that, but how training can bring us more consciousness. We started from the ideas from Dharma Art, working on the Dharma Art concepts framed by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (Trungpa 1996). We are working on this contemplative training – contemplative not in the sense that we spend a lot of time 'thinking about' – not like that, but as a way to approach life; an approach more peaceful, and more gentle. Gentle in the sense of accepting oneself and using all the possibilities that the reality can give us. How training can become a contemplative practice and how those psychophysical techniques can help us to develop this kind of more attentive behaviour.

Part Four: Towards a Theory of Cultivation

Deborah Middleton

In this final part of our presentation I would like to consider how we might understand this terrain, which is apparently shared by monks and actors, lamas and artists.

A useful approach to this inquiry is provided by the Japanese philosopher, Yuasa Yasuo, in his work on Eastern mind-body theory (Yuasa 1987; Yuasa 1993). Yuasa has explored the Japanese concept of '*shugyu*', given in English as 'self-cultivation' and used to describe both Buddhist practices and traditional Japanese artistic practices, including Noh Theatre training. In brief, Yuasa describes cultivation as 'a practical project aiming at the enhancement of the personality and the training of the spirit by means of the body.' (Yuasa 1987, p. 85)

Yuasa identifies self-cultivation practices as bringing about a profound shift in the practitioner's lived experience, which can be characterized as a development away from an ontological duality of mind and body towards a state of 'oneness of body-mind' (Yuasa 1987, pp. 24-25).

Whilst Eastern theories emphasize the inseparability of mind and body, Yuasa importantly notes that such an inseparability is not ontologically present without training. The oneness of body-mind, in which, Yuasa says 'There is no gap between the movement of the mind and that of the body' (1993, pp. 25–26) is an achievement brought about by assiduous practice.

What Yuasa's work makes clear is that meditation is an embodied practice. In the words of Thomas Kasulis,

Truth is not only a way of thinking about the world; it is a mode of being in the world, part of which includes one's own bodily existence...

[and]

... knowledge of the truth is a psychophysical awareness beyond mere intellection." (in Yuasa 1987, p. 2)

Viewed through the lens of Yuasa's discussion, both meditation and, for example, Noh Theatre training become processes of integrating and reconditioning the psychophysical system.

In order to understand this further, we need to briefly sketch Yuasa's model of the psychophysical system, which attempts to operate within Western physiological paradigms but also goes beyond them by embracing a level of functioning that corresponds to the *ki* system of Chinese Acupuncture. (see Nagatomo 1992, pp. 69-74). For Yuasa, there are two layers of consciousness - bright consciousness, which is self-conscious and capable of bringing awareness and volition to some

aspects of bodily experience - motor control, for example, and 'dark consciousness' which underlies the bright, is not capable of self-consciousness, and which relates to those aspects of our experience which go on without our direct perception of them. Yuasa's dark consciousness relates in part to the psychoanalytic unconscious but equally to the functioning of the autonomic nervous system (Yuasa 1987, pp. 4 - 6; p. 122). According to Kasulis, it is also related to the Buddhist notion of 'no-mind' and is, in fact, the ground for all of these aspects of being (Yuasa 1987, p 5).

Cultivation practices, then, are those which co-ordinate the relationship between bright and dark consciousness, bringing increasing levels of our being into bright consciousness, and bringing the directive force of bright consciousness to those aspects of our operating which would otherwise be influenced by complexes, ideas and forces seemingly beyond our control.

With regard to actor-training, then, we can differentiate between those approaches to the work of the actor which operate dualistically, training the body through physiological processes of skill-acquisition and those which emphasize a psychophysical approach, seeing the mind and body as intrinsically inseparable, but requiring cultivated coordination.

Thus, I propose that we can consider that the psychophysical actor-training practices that we have outlined this afternoon function through the same cultivation process as meditational practices, and that even without the direct influence of Buddhist performance forms and concepts, the actor's training, when designed to bring about 'oneness of bodymind', can cultivate a mode of being-in-the-world with the potential to function as a secular spirituality.

A hypothesis for further research might be that the experience of 'oneness of bodymind' provides an epistemology through which other perceived dualisms also begin to dissolve. The 'altered consciousness' of the practitioner is one layer of an altered ontology, and may lead to an entirely different perception and understanding of the nature of world and being.

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