

Presentation of “Falling over and through boundaries of self”

I would like to discuss the connection between SRT and CI as I experience it, as a dancer and teacher. During the years of practicing both and researching the moving self I have noticed a change in my CI dancing as if the SRT work has taken me onto another level of experiencing the dance with a partner. My curiosity as a teacher, who is always reflecting and responding to the dancers' self has driven me to a place where I have begun my CI classes with specific focuses, principles and partner studies/ graphics from SRT. Without much thinking at first the material was emerging from my body and the words were spoken as it is in the nature of the SRT class. I have noticed an incredible softening in the atmosphere of the class, a kind of readiness without effort, sensed an energy field that seemed safe and people deep engagement was palpable. Later on, after the classes when making notes, understandings and connections started to take shape. How can I grasp this connection without sacrificing either of the forms or technique, or ruin their specificity of intentions? What is this connection? Where does it lie? How does it work?

So I purposely began to design CI classes with the focus on the investigation of what the SRT could offer.

The Skinner Releasing Technique is a unique approach to dance training, as it integrates the technical development with the creative act. By teaching it for many years I have noticed the influence of the specific language of SRT when guiding the students for instance in a CI class. Not only the imagery is specific in SRT but it could be said that the language of SRT deconstructs the references of the concrete and closed terms, it softens the fixity of reality. It isn't a ready made construct, but a nascent lingual world. The images, the way they are given, the use of words, the instructions during the classes are all bringing forward the underlying principles of the technique. Principles like: *“awareness is the first step to change; suppleness is not weakness - it can release power; autonomy – and within the complexity of autonomy, the self moves as a unified whole; the technique fosters paring away to essences... etc.”*

The poetic imagery is in the heart of the SRT, although other parts of the pedagogy are essential and vital in the practice (movement studies and partner works / graphics). There are quite a few theories that explain how an image works in movement facilitation and it is also known how effective a use of image can be in improving technical skills and in realigning the body (for instance in ideokinetic practices) as it is discussed in Nisha Vyas's dissertation. Her investigation is an insightful and detailed study, but also here to note that most scientific researches in dance and sport sciences look at the use of image as mental visualization of the bodies movement. (*...in CI as well: visualizing a*

movement, then doing the movement while listening to the sensation...)

The specificity and uniqueness of the images in the Skinner Releasing Technique lies in their poetic nature and as such remains an experiential, poetic mystery if I can call it that way. In many interviews Joan Skinner explains her arrival to the poetic imagery and talks about her influences. The specificity of the images in the SRT is that *“it serves as the carrier of a patterned whole of information - a metaphor for kinaesthetic knowledge - which formulates a new conception for our direct imaginative grasp, and this metaphor is apprehended intuitively rather than analytically... The imagery in the SRT is a powerful tool for transformation.*

Letting go – common aspect of CI and SRT

When looking at SRT and CI and the effects on the person or self, there is a tangible commonality can be found. CI and SRT both are the reconquest of the primordial (*ˌprɪˈmɔːrdiəl*) senses of self, which are hidden by the verbal categories in the everyday fixation of meanings. This is expressed by the “joy” of letting go (in SRT): *“letting go of stress, letting go of unnecessary holding in our body, letting go of preconceptions about what is supposed to happen, letting go of fear of awkwardness, letting go of the belief that we don't have the right body for dancing. We let go of habitual holding patterns and habitual ways of thinking in order to let something new happen... “* (<http://www.skinnerreleasing.com/aboutsrt.html>)

Letting go is playing a major role in the discovery of what is possible in an unexpected situation while in a contact duet. The practice of releasing excess muscle tension has always been part of the contact training. As in CI there is a curious balance between the use of musculature, force, physical power, softening, action and allowing, the letting go of unnecessary tension is essential to listen to the sensation of movement and to the reflexes at work. The practice of releasing can prepare the individual for the unexpected, a kind of readiness appears and while in the practice of contact skills or technique a cultivation of the awarenesses can take place.

In CI there is a concrete physical exploration that happens and the terms are used to define it are often or mostly from physics. As Contact reduces our experience into a concrete, pure bodily experience, it eases us from the previously attached cultural and personal patterns, skills, fixations and as such it liberates the diversity and variety of the concrete experiences. SRT can possible add a multi-dimensional alternative space, thus the concrete bodily experiences can be fertilized by another world of the dynamic imagery.

CI and SRT - different senses of the self

As it is mentioned above, CI and SRT both are the reconquest of the primordial senses of self, but they are different. As CI builds on the concrete experiences of an integrated sense of physical self* (me and other core-self) *the physical self can be experienced “as a coherent, willful, physical entity with a unique affective life and history that belongs to it. It is an experiential sense of self that Stern calls the sense of core self.” and the flow of these, SRT refers to the earlier, emerging experience of sense of self, where information is not yet organized into a structure. (Stern, 1985).

Taking Stern's theory of the developmental progression of the sense of self, the earliest sense is the sense of emergent self that is “in the process of coming into being” (Stern). This emergent sense of the self is the very source of our creativity. If it is suggested that the process of SRT draws us back to the domain of emergent sense of self, it possibly explains Joan Skinner's statement that of the releasing dance is a dance that underlies all dance forms (interview with Stephanie Skura). CI could activate a later preverbal sense of self, where the core self has been stabilized, it's agency and physical integrity (coherence) is formed, but the bodily experience is not yet overwritten by the verbalization. In SRT the appearing lingual deconstruction undo the ordinary verbal and physical experience to trace back to the domain of the emergent experiences that is primal to the consolidated physical self. And if so, practicing CI with the foundation of SRT can offer a wider and deeper experience of preverbal self-senses.

Lets place here a few points where the two worlds are different:

SRT - CI

being danced (by an image) – dancing (with a partner)

global experience – concrete experience

dimensions and spaces that are opened by the imagination (another reality) - concrete spaces

dissolving boundaries – observation of the boundaries

being moved by the global other (something that transcends me) – i am moved by the concrete other

The exciting fact about working with both is that the two different kinds of experiences are balanced in the lived experience and can be synthesized.

In CI we examine the physical forces that act upon on our bodies, learn and practice to listen to sensation, to gravity and the inner happenings by ourselves and while being with a partner.

If we are looking at two (lets call them) areas, one is the falling, in SRT as an image and in Contact the practice and sensation of falling, the other is the experience of the boundary of the self we could probably see where the above mentioned differences lie.

Experience of falling

In SRT falling is an image, it is not a movement we do or practice. The image is given when lying on the floor after being prepared for receiving it in a deeper conscious state. A *'deep states,' where our brain waves slow down and we journey just below conscious level.*

(<http://www.skinnerreleasing.com/aboutsrt.html>)

The image of **falling** and the experience of being in the falling progresses throughout the pedagogy of SRT. It also connects to the multi-dimensional and multi-directional balancing and to one of the basic principle of releasing, which is letting go. When being in an image of falling (like lying in an enormous hammock as it swings in slow deep arcs) one can be taken by it, and there is no suggestion what so ever to do the falling movement, but offers a possibility to experience being in the falling. Later in the practice one can be danced in the state of falling. The aim of the practice is not to do the falling but to experience the kinesthetic sense of falling. This could possibly add to the actual performance of a falling movement during dancing contact.

In CI falling is a movement, it is what we do, or better saying allowing it to happen. When we are falling we are sensing our weight falling, our mass moving towards the Earth (let gravity take us..). The listening to the sensation of our weight falling (either one part of our body or the whole body) can be considered as a continuance practice, to be in it, or perhaps being “lost in it”. But the practice of falling connects to being supported by “means” like a partner(s), and / or the Earth. Although the momentum of falling can be taken to another movement (transformed) – like practicing falling through rather than arriving to a place, we are spending a lot of time on practicing the arrival of the falling.

When “doing” or letting the falling happen, it is very much connected to landing either on the floor or on a partner or at the moment of landing taking the momentum of the fall into another movement (vertical fall into a horizontal travel – as one of the basic practices). The practice of falling is one of the essentials of CI, and the exploration comes from examination of the physical forces and laws. Here the practice means doing concrete movements where the “task” is to catch and recognize our reflexes at work and find out the way movement is happening (find out the how? - how do I catch myself if I start falling from standing to the floor or to a partner by shifting out of the vertical line?)

With the practice of particular moves connected to a particular physical sensations we are able to arrive at a place where we trust our bodies, our “landings and we feel safe and are able to let ourselves fall perhaps with a high velocity (if wished...). We might be “falling up” and get to a sense of “flying”.

There is a principle of SRT that there is no up and down in connection to the forces of the Universe. Movement happens “into or out” of the Earth. As there is no up and down falling can take place in all directions. When allowing ourselves to be taken by the image of falling, a dance can happen, we can be danced (or not). The concrete movement of falling might not happening, but rather we are being danced in the state of falling into all directions. The dance is within falling, we are in falling and not doing the falling itself. The falling and the experience of it can be endless without an arrival. Another principle of SRT that falling becomes rising, there is no change between lying on the floor and moving on our feet – for instance, the relationship to gravity is suspended with an integration of weight and buoyancy.

For me the difference between the two experiences of falling is enormous and yet somewhere connected. After a while it does not really matter if I am doing the falling movement while dancing CI or not, what matters is that “I” am taken and being danced by falling. This is an alive, ready and integrated state of being, a unique presence.

Experience of boundaries

The diversity of experiences of the boundaries and the touch in CI and SRT can also refer to the operation of the different senses of self. The constantly being touched or touching (and the focus on that) in CI one can live/sense/experience the boundaries, as it mobilizes the integrated physical core sense of self. While SRT loosens more and transcends the boundaries of self and operates with an open ended, global, emerging sense of self.

The boundary of our body is the skin. It separates, protects and connects us to the outer world. “*It is the largest organ of the body and performs many functions. It helps us sense our surroundings and provides a barrier to environmental insults.*”

(<http://www.nature.com/nature/supplements/insights/skin/>)

Through the skin we physically connect to the Earth, to our partner, to air, and sensing through the skin is an exciting phenomena. In CI we practice moving by touch. Touch is very concrete. It is here

and now. We learn to listen to it and putting it simply, what happens on the surface of the body tells us where to go and what to do. There has been many directions discovered over the years of the development of CI on examining the ways of touching, practicing listening to sensation through the skin, intention of touch, playing with pressure, force, resistance etc. But what is constantly present is the sense of where I am and where my partner is. The awareness of our boundaries, which does not mean a barrier. Sensing of the boundary is actually offers a possibility to explore what can be beyond... Energy does not stop at the surface of the body...

In SRT the experience of our edges is not directly connected to the skin and touch is also used differently. Partner graphics – hands on works – are used *to let go of unnecessary holding patterns* and suggesting new – possible – awareness's *and to encourage maximum freedom of movement.*

In the terminology of SRT tissue is used instead of skin, and it means more than the skin layer of the body. It stands for everything in our physical self that is not a bone.

As SRT is not analytical but experiential, it looks at the whole self as a network of energies. In the practice as we let our tissues soften we can become available and ready for any impulse, we can experience being in the moment, being in the image, being moved and at times practicing just being. As expanding the self can become constant, when in the state of releasing, the energy can express itself in any form. We are opening in and opening out. In and out and in all directions opening. We can be aware or not of our edges, or boundaries, but in SRT we are constantly moving through our edges, merging with what is around us and gradually dissolving. We do not consider the whole self as a separation from but being part of a larger system. Images like the “Pool” totality (*lets spend a moment of an image of a pool: a lovely crystal clear pool – and the whole self can float in the pool for a moment --- some areas of the pool are shallow, and others are deep --- as we are floating in our pool, we can perhaps begin to merge with it – and the outer edges of us become the outer edges of the pool.... totality!*) in class 9 “our outer edges merging with the edges of the pool” coaxes us into that larger system. *“Connecting our physicality with our imagination, we end up with an empowered self much greater than the sum of its parts.”*

And to end it with another quote:

“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.” (from the website of SRT)

To draw for the discussions above I suggest the possible ways for interoperability of the two forms:

Pedagogy:

- 1/ The use of language in the SRT as extending terminology and the awareness of words in a CI class (into the floor, out of floor, rise/fall; allow, let; suggest; we might...)
- 2/ The teachers presence in a CI class, and the attitude towards the participants; thus the playfulness, direction and intention of voice (guidance from the energetic self and letting go of “ego”- not telling but suggesting – offering and not ordering)

Material and structure:

- 1/ Teaching an SRT class followed by a CI class – in which the material can follow directly or indirectly the underlying principles of the given SRT class, or awarenesses can be cultivated further; this way the SRT can prepare for but also enhance the practice of CI (like working with the image of melting further with a partner taken into a duet dance, where melting can happen into the floor into all direction and into and away from the partner)
- 2/ Movement and partner studies with an image prior to and during a specific contact practice (like the power of the haunches and the image of the dome shape space of the skull – moving in relation to each other → it was practiced first then taken into a leg swing lifting practice...; or the torso suspension partner practice)
- 3/ Perhaps based on SRT images develop images for CI duets, develop scores and practices → many teachers developed their images that are helpful, playful, useful for improvisations; as there are images used in technical or skill practices as well, besides visualization of movement...

Closing thoughts – sharing the experience of a professional dancer, who has trained with ballet, and later modern and contemporary dance techniques and has taken both SRT and CI classes:

“Somehow the increased sensory awareness gained through use of imagery on one level helps to facilitate greater understanding of my changing environment. - In CI the surfaces which I work off of are alive and in constant state of change. The merging of the boundaries of the individual selves that lead to greater movement production rely on receptiveness, the ability of the individual body to listen and receive information. - I'm reminded that imagery in CI has allowed me to move away from being a conscious, active agent in the dance and instead given me space and time to listen to the changing environment and respond instinctively and intuitively, away from the need to enact a particular desire on the other. I feel in a comfortable state where I don't feel a pressure 'to do' anything, to decide on anything.” (Sam)

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