

A Butoh Dance Method for Psychosomatic Exploration

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Abstract

The Butoh dance method systemized by T.Kasai for psychosomatic exploration and integration was described together with the physical exercises of Noguchi Taiso and the bodywork of Takeuchi Lessons. The author found that this method was useful also in Russia and the Ukraine [1,2] for psychological practice and that there is a great need for the method alongside other western psychosomatic systems. This paper outlines the content of the Butoh dance method and the procedures of preparatory exercises, showing their empirical effects for several parts of the body in order to enlarge our understanding of mind-body relationships, and notes that the Butoh method gives another approach to wholistic self realization.

1. The psychosomatic approach in Japan

There have been various ideas and methods for creating mind-body integration in the West: Alexander technique, Sensory awareness, Gestalt therapy, Bioenergetics, Feldencrais method. These systems have been introduced in Japan. J.P.Plummer described and compared these psychosomatic therapies and techniques in detail from the viewpoint of correcting posture and muscle imbalance [3].

J.Nicholls and S.Carey compared Alexander Technique with almost 20 different psychosomatic approaches by classifying them as depth psychology, bodywork, and Eastern/esoteric [4].

This paper deals with a Butoh dance method that has been influenced by two psychosomatic systems originated by M. Noguchi and T. Takeuchi. However, both systems are not known well outside Japan. Perhaps the basic understanding of mind-body in the Noguchi and Takeuchi systems is too different from the rather mechanical image of mind-body in the West for westerners to comprehend their whole ideas. A close look at them shows some similarities with the western systems, but they seem to remain as enigmas to non-Japanese people. Noguchi compares bodily movements with the structures of

Japanese ideographs and Takeuchi uses the term "karada-to-kotoba" (body-word) as an entity and never splits it into two as seen in Martin Buber's philosophical term "I-thou" the inseparable unity.

Noguchi Taiso (physical exercise) was pioneered by Michizo Noguchi in the 1970s independently of western methods, and has been admitted and employed as an effective training system by actors and dancers who need mind-body relaxation and movement without unnecessary tension.

A basic idea of Noguchi Taiso is that our body is not a skeleton with muscles and flesh on it, but a kind of water bag in which our bones and viscera are floating. He also places great emphasis on the significance of the weight of our body, saying "listen to the god of weight," and appreciates most efficient movements with minimum muscle tension and instant tension release.

He wrote that "Muscles exist not for resisting and governing the gravity. Muscles are the ears for listening to the words of God - Gravity." "Noguchi Taiso does not restrict movement patterns, nor give a name to the movement according to the bodily shape, nor determine the purpose or aim of the movement in advance . . ." [5]

Toshiharu Takeuchi, one of the famous drama

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directors, started his drama lessons, known as Takeuchi Lessons, also in the 1970s by utilizing Noguchi Taiso and integrated it with his long struggle about how to utter words as a deafened person. [6]

He participated in the intensive workshop with Carl Rogers in Tokyo (1983) - organized by the Japanese Association for Humanistic Psychology, and showed his deep insights about the mind-body relationship there. This was one of the major turning points concerning the mind-body theme among humanistic psychologists. The author also participated in the C.Rogers workshop and had a chance there to experience a Takeuchi Lesson: One of the basic exercises by Takeuchi, called "Ude no burasage"- arm relaxation, is a simple relaxation task. The participant relaxes his/her arm while the arm is lifted slowly by another person and is released. It was a shocking experience to find that my arm unconsciously helped the upward movement and did not fall even after it was released.

Psychological papers experimentally confirmed [7,8,9] that 80-90% of the subjects failed to release tension from their arms in the task. Since then, the author has been studying mind-body relationships through relaxation and tension release and has been doing Butoh dance in order to translate theoretical conceptions into practice.

2. Butoh dance

Butoh dance is a Japanese avant-garde dance originated by Tatsumi Hijikata in the 1960s. It was a radical artistic dance style called "Ankoku Butoh - dark and black dance" danced by white painted naked dancers. Butoh dance was found to be a shocking and eccentric dance at that time even in Japan and still keeps the original aggressive impact. [10]

Kanoko Hata, a Japanese female Butoh dancer active in South East Asia, wrote that:

- As against a basic concept of "how to stand" of other dances, the basis of Butoh dance by Hijikata lies in an unstandable body that cannot be stood by volition or an uncontrollable body that cannot be operated by intention . . .

- A general understanding of Butoh is that 1) by using body characteristics of Japanese such as "ganimata" (bandy-leg or bow-leg), to keep the body's gravity center low, 2) to dig up gestures or

figures that have been buried in the darkness of history, and to float them onto the white painted flesh, 3) to dance a distorted and anomalous style [11].

The definition of Butoh may vary among Butoh dancers, but this seems to cover the basic ideas of Butoh. One of the interesting things above is that Butoh has an aspect of "body archaeology," digging out something buried deep in the body, which seems unique compared to the other dance styles.

Some of other impressive things of Butoh are that 1) Butoh dancers don't pursue high jumping or fast spinning as seen in ballet, 2) they cover the mirrors with cloths in the lesson room when they practice Butoh dance so as to avoid visual understanding of the body, 3) they pay much attention to their breathing and so influenced bodily or visceral subtle reactions, 4) they have employed some exercises of Noguchi Taiso for their basic training.

Although Butoh is a dance, it is not confined by the ordinary definition of dance, especially by the western images of dancing with rhythmical and physically dynamic movements. Butoh allows the dancer to keep standing fixedly or rolling on the ground if there is a mind-body necessity for the dancer to do so.

Butoh dance has been accepted worldwide as a peculiar performing art, however, its therapeutic function of mind-body entity was not well introduced outside Japan. Some Butoh dancers have given Butoh dance lessons in mental hospitals, and the psychological studies have reported its effectiveness for patients' recovery [12]. The implication of this would be that, although Butoh dance is a performing art shown in front of an audience, Butoh is also keen on what is going on internally in the dancer's mind-body rather than how his/her body appears to the audience. Apart from the choreographed movements for a stage performance, the ongoing process of mind-body interaction is most significant in Butoh dance.

The author has been dancing as a Butoh dancer since 1988, and has found that Butoh dance and its training method can be utilized for psychosomatic exploration and integration, because it enables people to live their own naturally arising emotions such as anger, depression, sorrow, fear, joy, etc. - the suppressed emotions that are socially thought to be unwelcome under certain circumstances - by actually

occurring bodily reactions of spasm, unintentional jerks, tremor, facial or bodily distortion, falling down, stamping, rolling on the floor, and so on. Butoh also gives an opportunity for our aesthetic or spiritual sentiments to come out from the forgotten layer of our mind, and it often becomes a soul purifying experience. Deep relaxation and spiritual tranquility often follows Butoh dancing as seen in meditation.

A term "meditational dance" exists in dance therapy, and Butoh sometimes appears as its example. However, Butoh cannot always maintain the meditative calmness because there are lots of explosive factors in our mind-body that make the dancing rather aggressive. Because of this characteristic, the well danced Butoh sometimes shocks the audience and also the dancer him/herself without allowing any verbal equivocation.

There are several advantages to Butoh dance as a psychosomatic exploration method: a) Butoh dance is suitable for perceiving the delicate relationship of conscious intention and subconscious reaction, b) induced emotional reactions sometimes open much deeper bodily reactions, c) experiencing such movements gives easing and healing effects to the person through dancing, d) the dancing person becomes capable of selecting and tuning the emotional or physical level according to his/her condition.

Since Butoh dance can be a challenge to the deeper existence of the self, relaxation and flexibility of reaction are extremely important in the preparatory phase as seen in Takeuchi Lessons where the occasional laughter and peaceful stillness are characteristics before a challenge toward the mind-body entity. The Butoh dance method for psychosomatic exploration hence includes two stages, the relaxation stage and the movement stage.

3. Butoh dance method

A) Relaxation stage

The followings are some of the characteristic exercises in Noguchi Taiso and Takeuchi Lessons, and are used as the preparatory exercises for Butoh dance with some necessary modification. The exercises here are usually carried out by pairs of participants, and their roles are alternated. The person who experiences the exercise takes the role of

the helper after his/her turn. The role exchange means that each exercise is a mutual learning occasion showing the interdependency of mind-body reactions and the individual differences.

Ude-burasage (arm relaxation) lesson

This is often used as the first exercise in Takeuchi Lessons. It gives the participants chances 1) to feel his/her arm's tension, 2) to touch the other person's arm, 3) to perceive the tension of the partner's arm, 4) to realize that trying to release tension from the arm is difficult and unintentional reactions sometime occur, 5) to enjoy laughing by finding that the arm of a partner does not fall even after it is released, 6) to enjoy the relaxed relationship with participants through sharing the experience in the group. After this exercise, some enjoyable physical exercises usually follow to warm-up the participants' bodies and the atmosphere.

Karada-Hogushi (body-untying) lesson

This exercise looks like a massage with one person lying on the floor and his/her arm being shaken gently by another person. But, such shaking does not aim to massage or lengthen the arm's muscles or tendons, but to give the person the sensation of passive movement and the opportunity to discover what is happening in his/her mind-body: While massage aims at muscles and tendons, Hogushi attempts to unfasten the person's defensive mind-set (or body-set) by giving him/her the time to perceive his/her own mind-body.

In Takeuchi Lessons, this type of exercise has been highly developed. There are Hogushi exercises with fixed procedures aiming at the arms, the head, the neck, the legs, etc. The procedure is simple, but the most important point lies in the mind set of both participants toward the lesson. Each person must open his/her mind and try to perceive what is going on both inside and outside of his/her mind-body as well as of the partner's mind-body. Interdependency is often observed where the tension of the person exercising comes from the tension or anxiety of the helping person. When touching is perceived as a fearful intrusion into the mind-body, it is necessary for the couple to discuss the reasons. (The bodywork or an exercise may not be suitable or effective for the people suffering mental illness although there have not occurred serious problems in the relaxation exercises.)

The arm relaxation exercise for Hogushi consists of the elbow, shoulder, and wrist test: When the exerciser lies down, the helper catches hold of the person's hand and lifts it a bit while keeping the elbow on the floor, and let go the arm to check whether there is tension in the elbow or not. It is a surprise to find that this simple exercise is difficult for most people for the first time. The arm sometimes stays fixed or jerks unconsciously. If there is tension, the helper feels and tells him/her that. After several trials, most people get accustomed to releasing tension from the elbow, but some 10-20% of people still keep tension and show the awkward reactions repeatedly.

The helper then raises the arm more so as to make the elbow rise from the floor, and again lets go of the arm to check, this time, the shoulder tension. Usually, the shoulder reacts like a robot with unnecessary strain. The task of the helper is to tell the person when and which part of the arm and shoulder is tensed and to give the person the chance to feel what is happening in his/her arm and shoulder. By making a feinting action of lifting or letting-go now and then, the helper can explore the reflexive reactions in the shoulder muscles of the exerciser.

As the wrist is lighter than the whole arm, the wrist test should be done more slowly than in the elbow and shoulder test. The helper lifts up the exerciser's arm and makes it stand straight upon the elbow with the wrist bent to the back. As the arm is moved toward the shoulder on the elbow fulcrum, the wrist falls forward to the palm side at a point. This is called the Cat's paw exercise. In most cases, people cannot wait for the falling point of the wrist and unintentionally bend the wrist. After checking tension reduction of one arm, the other arm is checked.

The leg and head relaxation exercises are similar to the arm exercises. The points of Hogushi lessons are 1) to move slowly in order for the exerciser to feel the unconscious reactions distinctly, 2) to teach him/her when and where tension appears, 3) to confuse him/her by feinting movements and elicit the unconscious jerking responses in order to find out the reflexive conditioned responses, 4) to give a careful consideration and respect to the strained responses because they may be connected with mental traumas or physical injuries, 5) to make a warm and

supportive atmosphere when doing these exercises because they are for relaxation and mind-body calmness.

After the exercises for three body parts, the couple exchange their roles.

Although this is not a massage, people often feel deep relaxation after tension-relaxation cycles of mind-body and some people fall asleep during the exercise. As the main purpose is not to make people sleep, the helper should ask the person whether he/she wants to sleep or exercise.

A piece of advice to people who are not good at releasing tension: it is not necessary to attempt to release tension intentionally because such endeavor unconsciously invites tension, and paying attention to the body part is more important than being possessed with the idea of trying to relax. (Relaxation results as a phenomenon after shifting the intentional control to the sub-consciousness.)

Nenyoro (body-waving) lesson

Noguchi's conceptualization of the body is different from the mechanical and anatomical understanding of the body: "The human body is a kind of a water bag in which bones and muscles and viscera are floating." Nenyoro lesson is a chance to realize that this is the case. The helping person grasps the ankles of the person lying down with both hands and shakes both legs together horizontally, making waves from the legs to the head through the trunk. The helper changes the wave speed and rhythms and sees the body react to the changes. The exerciser can perceive that the body is not a solid object but a soft container of liquid.

After the relaxation exercises, the conscious level usually goes deep down from the ordinary level, and this is the preparatory mental condition for the movement stage below. Several breathing techniques and exercises are sometimes employed to accelerate this process. (It has been known by psychologists that this mind-body condition solely helps mental frustrations and conflicts as in Autogenic Training.)

B) Movement stage

There are two types of Butoh dance, one is performed in front of an audience as a performing art (tentatively named "Butoh level 2"), the other for the dancer him/herself, performed without being

seen by other people ("Butoh level 1"). The latter is the dance for psychosomatic exploration and the description below is limited to this type of Butoh dance. Some of the movements appear to be a Noguchi Taiso or a relaxation exercise, but the purpose and the mental attitude is different so as to turn the ordinary exercises into a Butoh movement.

While doing the exercises below, something different from the supposed framework of bodily movements happens sometimes, and you should allow that you are driven away from where you are to another unknown province that the body's reactions take you. It is not necessary to be in a trance, but to be under loose conscious control of mind-body for the unconscious reactions to come out easily.

The exercises are not dangerous as far as the body's reactions lead you and you can continue with the unaccustomed movements without fear. Accordingly, the judgment whether to halt or continue depends upon the person who is doing the exercise. In Autogenic Training, originated by J.H.Shultz for relaxation, the autonomously occurring responses are called Autogenic release. In the dance therapy, the unconsciously induced irregular movements are often called "the authentic movement" and are supposed to be avoided when the person has a mental problem or disorder. Since Butoh exercise is basically an adventure toward the subconscious province, the ability to go into and get back from the province is required and necessary. In this point, gradual attempts are usually enough and sufficient by allowing the person to proceed by picking his/her steps carefully.

The exercises here are examples as a key or gate to such transference of mind-body, these are not something you have to master but the starting points for Butoh dance level 1.

Distortion

Intentional distortion of parts of body sometimes induces further distortions, fixation or thrust in the face, arm, trunk, back, leg, etc. As the movements of this type are not seen and persuaded in other body-oriented systems, body distortion may be a characteristic of Butoh that directly faces the dark side (suppressed factors) of our mind-body. Facial distortions, which are usually funny for the first time, become accompanied with muscle vibrations or tics, and can set off a chain reaction of

distortion of other parts of the body. Letting go of some distorted parts of the body sometimes becomes necessary when you wish to distort other additional parts.

Vibration and waves

Vibration and waves in the body naturally occurs in the knees or thighs or legs when you stand in a cramped low position such as described and utilized in Bioenergetics. It is difficult to keep the vibration long for the first time because the muscles soon become fixed. Relaxation exercises are necessary in advance for body vibration. Sometimes vibration elicits more abrupt reactions such as jerking, non directional jumping or kicking etc. and they lead to the movement stage of Butoh level 1.

It is necessary to enhance bodily flexibility in order to make vibration and also to guard yourself from sudden movements.

Breathing

Breathing patterns always change the mind-body. As Stanislav Grof noticed that any meditational system includes the change of breathing pattern, long inhaling and exhaling makes you calm and peaceful, and short and fast breathing such as hyper breathing of Holotropic therapy by S.Grof leads even to fainting. Because we suppress deep breathing, even simple deep breathing is a first step of Butoh with unexpected bodily reactions.

Movements

There are several basic movement patterns and sequences in Butoh level 2, however, because they were choreographed and fixed for a stage performance, they are not so important for the mind-body exploration described here. A conscious intention to move parts of the body usually makes the body move as planned. In Butoh movements, unexpected stimuli such as the external sounds, lights, temperature or internal feelings, pains, itches, etc. naturally give impetus to the change of movement and poise. However, the resultant movements are not so significant but the mind-set or body-set which invites and enables such abrupt changes are. The mind-body-set and the movements are cyclically stimulating and one changes the other, making a cycle or spiral for change.

In an ordinary dance lesson, mental images are sometimes used to make your body move toward the

movement that the images depict. If this method keeps your consciousness alert and confine your movement inside of the images, you may be even tempted to look into the mirror to check whether your movements correspond to the images. These movements are a reproduction of your thoughts, and are not Butoh dance but a planned behavior led by the images. Visual imagery should be used only as a movement starter.

A simple exercise for Butoh level 1 is a repetitive movement of any kind. While doing a fixed pattern of movement repeatedly, if the initiative shifts down from your consciousness to the subconsciousness, then unexpected changes will occur in the movement because of the changes derived from internal or external stimuli, and this process leads you to the unknown (or at least unplanned) province of mind-body. Distortion, vibration and breathing are the key components of the process of change and of the mind-body exploration.

Butoh dance for stage performance is not discussed here, but it must be added that it is very important that dancing is seen by other people even when the dance belongs to the private Butoh dance level 1. Human beings, born and brought up among people, are a social being, and the existence of other people is a great stimulus influencing the mind-body situation and the dancing. As the dancer who practices for oneself and by oneself soon notices, the private Butoh increases the degree of solitude a lot during practicing. However, the deep solitude is necessary to perceive the undeniable fact that each person is connected in the deep layer of the mind, soul, spirit, body, etc. This is not a religious statement or a belief, but an ordinary experience realized by the solitary dancer when he/she notices that his/her dance is really changed by an audience whether or not the audience is visible existence. A sense of the deep relatedness, the *communitas* - community in a silent mind-body sphere, eases and heals the essential solitude of our existence.

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