



The Skinner Releasing Technique: an elucidation by Karl Anderson

Performatica: Foro Internacional De Danza Contemporanea Y Artes De Movimiento Universidad De Las Americas (Puebla, Mexico)

March/April 2008

Joan Skinner is in her eighties and currently resides in Seattle Washington. She was a principle dancer in the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. As a result of a severe back injury, Joan began experiments in 1963 which eventually evolved into the Skinner Releasing Technique. For many years she was the Dean of Dance at the University of Washington as well as a prolific choreographer. Joan is now continuously redefining, teaching, and disseminating her technique around the globe.

I was introduced to the Skinner Releasing Technique in 1987, while dancing with Stephanie Skura. In 1989, I sustained an impact injury to my left knee. Participating in Skinner classes allowed me to dance without pain. From 1990 to 1998, I took a hiatus from dance while I returned to school to study architecture. Immediately upon graduation, I started dancing again. However, my muscles had atrophied and my movement skills were rusty. I was not sufficiently conscientious with my transition back into being highly physical once again. As a result, I had to have knee surgery. Taking the Skinner Releasing Technique was the keystone of my rebuilding process. In addition to the healing aspects of Skinner, I believe that participating in somatic learning creates smarter and more mature dancers. As a choreographer, Skinner has become perhaps my most valuable technical and creative tool. I decided to become a Skinner Releasing Technique facilitator so that I might share the numerous benefits that this discipline has to offer.

The Skinner Releasing Technique is a movement-based and imagery-based process of discovery. Skinner classes have five basic components: Partner Graphics, Movement Studies, Checklists, Image actions, and Totalities.

The Partner Graphics are hands-on tactile suggestions of how our alignments might be in a releasing state. As one person assists the other with their discoveries, the physical touching and verbal cues are conveyed as a source of information only. There is no judgment and the touch is never insistent or demanding. This approach allows the receiving student to make their own connections in their own time so that their awareness is holistic and changes can occur from a series of constructive choices. As an example, during a Partner Graphic, a giving partner might take the weight of a receiving partner's arm and gently move their partner's arm around in space as they also gently press on their partner's shoulder. The receiver might notice if they have any habitual holding or gripping in the shoulder or neck. The receiver now has a choice of how to respond to these signals. They might simply become aware of certain restrictions or limitations and rest assured that this awareness in-and-of-itself is the first step towards change, or they might allow for a releasing response to the stimulus and begin a mutual deconstruction of their learned inhibitions, or perhaps they might also begin an ongoing behavioral modification process which could eventually lead to a re-patterning journey, healing process, and newfound ease and grace within the self.

Movement Studies are designed so that the student might experience certain physical sensations or conceptual notions while still being in a relatively rational state of mind. The student might be invited to move freely while experimenting with certain alignment principles which will in-turn influence their movement choices and qualitative range. If, during a Movement Study, a student is allowing their skull to be suspended and floating-with-ease while also allowing for streams of energy to emanate through and along their legs and then out into space so that they are counterbalancing then the alignment of the self becomes automatic and intuitive. Balancing no longer necessitates muscling through different held-positions as a result of a mental effort. Rather, it can become a series of dynamic multi-directional focuses which improve the moving alignment and can foster a deeper understanding of the old adage 'less is more'. By employing numerous suggestive cues such as dynamic stillness, or simultaneous autonomy of various parts of the physical self, or gazing out into space from deep behind the eyes; the student is able to engage within a cognitive process while also being on the verge of immersion within a given sensation. The result is a free flowing yet thorough series of explorations where in the student discovers increased precision, articulation, and overall efficiency.

Checklists are usually preparations for Image Actions or Totalities. They can be sequential and directional or they can be instantaneous and holistic. Although they might be given while the student is standing or moving around in the space they are usually given while the student is lying comfortably on their back. A quality or action is identified and then it is applied to

the student in such a way that the student can personalize the releasing aspect of the signal. The following is an example of a Checklist given toward the beginning of Class One.

As we are lying gently on our backs once again we can explore the possibility that no one part of the self compresses or congeals against any other part of the self. So we can cultivate maximum freedom of movement.

There is a natural directional pattern of energy for the skull. Allow our focus to return to the skull for a moment as it moves gently. Feeling its separation from the neck, it floats free of the neck and away from the neck, and it opens lots of space around the neck.

And turning our focus to the shoulders. They too have a directional pattern. They are not only softening, but dropping away from the skull and opening to the side.

And then the ribs in front, they too are softening and dropping away from the shoulders, towards the feet.

And the back. The back can melt into the floor and spread in all directions.

No one part of the self compresses or congeals against another part of the self. So we have maximum freedom to move.

Once the Checklist has been given, a certain amount of time is allowed so that the sensations can be fully personalized and experienced. Then there is a gentle transition into another aspect of that particular class.

Image actions are deep states where the possibility of embodying an image usually leads to movement. As the student is still lying on their back and existing within the kinesthetic resonance of a Checklist, the Skinner facilitator guides the student through the creation of a fanciful image. The images used in Skinner act as metaphors for a feeling state. A student is invited to participate in the qualities imbued within an image. For example: a cool white mist swirling through our vast cavernous inner-spaces. At first, one might move the white mist; then, the white mist might move them; and finally, perhaps the self and the white mist might become one. The feeling state is therefore not merely a dramatic interpretation of an image but rather an experience of immersion or complete identification with the imagery.

Totalities are deep states where the possibility of embodying an image usually does not lead to movement so the student can relate to an image as more of a meditation. The following Totality is given in Class Nine:

Let's spend a moment with 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 other areas are deep.

As we are floating in our pool, we can perhaps begin to merge with the pool, and the outer edges of us become the outer edges of the pool.

Depending on what precedes a Totality or where the Totality exists within the progression of a particular class or the overall sequence of classes, it might last anywhere from twenty seconds to twenty minutes and each student has their own distinct experience within a Totality. Experiencing this complete identification with a feeling state allows the student to be fully receptive to existing within an actively releasing state of being. A completely safe environment for becoming fully vulnerable.

There are three main things to consider while taking a Skinner class. Firstly, there is no right or wrong: the teacher is not a model and other students are not models. In this absence of judgment, Skinner attempts to generate empathy which in turn can lead toward compassion. Secondly, Skinner is experiential and not analytical: the 'why' questions can be put aside for a while so that a sense of mystery can prevail. And lastly, Skinner is about process and not product.

At times, Skinner classes might seem vague because the methodology is unrelentingly indirect and oblique. Joan is interested in each student making their own discoveries in their own time and this evolutionary process can be both personal and profound. Anatomical terms are strictly avoided so that we can experience the self as an integrated being and not a set of parts. This omission seeks to allow the student to be enveloped within an associative experience so that the cognitive mind can take

a break while the intuitive self flourishes. Many specific words are never used during a Skinner class. Up and down are not used because if a student associates a floating and suspended skull with an upward sensation then the experience of ease will most probably be interrupted if the student does a forward roll or finds themselves inverted for a moment. Suspension is a sensation that may or may not at times be related to gravity or direction. So a whole bevy of Newtonian-based language is avoided in favor of a more relativistic approach to awareness. Our perceptions are allowed to be more varied and multi-faceted within this post-Einstein world. Since Skinner is a somatic practice, words like mind and body are never used during class. More integrative language like self, whole self, or even physical self are used so as to avoid any association with the mind versus the body duality conundrum. Since Skinner is focused intuitively from within one's own experiences, as opposed to structurally or formulaically from the exterior, words like style and work are never used during class.

Many of the orthodox movement techniques, especially at the college level, focus on the act-of-instruction. Instruction for its own sake is used as an authoritarian device. Students learn to become fully and unquestionably compliant as they muscle through various routines. They are expected as to fully attain the properly codified examples of aesthetic correctness. The resulting accumulated tension and blocked energy often leads to injuries and a distorted sense-of-self. The medium of dance has simply become too intelligent for this.

Somatic techniques enable the dancer to discover their own human idiosyncrasies: their own specific mechanical logic, the intuitive awareness of their own neuro-muscular system, and the existence of their own imagistic realities. The very nature of somatic techniques is such that a student may or may not fully integrate the various concepts within a given time frame. However, the intended long term result is a mature person who is a self-motivated and self-propelled critical thinker.

Thank you.