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Spirituality And Actor Training

By

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A Definition:

Spirituality: 1) Of the spirit or the soul 2) Of sacred things or matters. This definition might also include words like *Balance, Unity, Faith, and Courage*. As an actor I would be glad if my peers attributed any of those qualities to either my work or me.

A Thesis:

This paper intends to show that conservatory theatre teachers and acting teachers in specific are using the techniques and ethos of Taoism, Zen and First Nations spirituality in their studios. I will suggest what they are 'borrowing' and why they are doing it, whether they are conscious of this borrowing or not.

A Motivation:

I currently teach Acting at Brandon University. I have been a student of acting all my life. Through my teachers and my research I have come into contact with Carnegie Mellon, Cornell, Yale, Manchester Metropolitan, The National Voice Intensive, The National Theatre School of Canada, The Actor's Studio in London, The Odin Theatre, and the University's of Alberta and Victoria to name a few. From a very young age I noticed that teaching methodologies in the field of an artistic, creative endeavor like the theatre are all basically trying to do the same thing: explain the unexplainable. What is it that brings about creativity and how do you make it consistent. My body and voice was trained to 'leap tall buildings with a single bound' (if you'll permit a reference to a Canadian hero). My mind was taught to analyze the psychological and sociological motivations of a playwright and a character. But how do I put it together to create the magic that I see when great actors transform before my eyes on-stage?

In 1990-91 three things happened to me. I started teaching my own classes. I visited India. And I took a class in Meditation. Gradually I began to investigate Eastern religions. I was drawn to Taoism especially and I began to notice similarities in not only the exercises/practices but also in the theory between the religious student and the actor in training. What previously had been in the shadows of my consciousness was becoming obvious.

Examples of what I am talking about include Tai Chi, Alexander Technique, relaxation, Breathing exercises, Sharing Circles and Creative Visualization. I hope to prove that the main benefit of these techniques is at least fourfold:

1. Increased Self-Awareness.
2. A linking of mind and body.
3. The elimination of desire for success by focusing on process.
4. A greater sense of community.

I propose to examine four areas of Studio work that I feel have a direct connection to the spirituality of another culture. I like to call them *Breathing*, *The Swamp*, *Alexander*, and *Sharing Circles*. I will provide specific exercises, practitioners, and rationale.

Self-Awareness

Whether it is Stansislavsky, Boleslavski, Joseph Chaikin or Michael Chekov most teachers of Acting will agree that knowing yourself is an essential part of the process. And part of this self-awareness has to focus on what Stansislavski called "the inner creative mood," a synthesis of mind, spirit and body. The spiritual training methods I am going to describe contribute directly to the actors self awareness and are therefore at the heart of their training. I propose that the connection to spiritual training forms a natural 'bridge' from 'in' to 'out', from the body to the mind.

1. Breathing

We all have a body and a spirit that need to be receptive to themselves and the stimuli of the moment to moment reality of the given circumstances and style of the play. Joseph Chaikin calls this the presence of the actor. He says in his book of that title:

The senses must be awake to what's happening and to what's being created, transforming the space, always able to return to the quiet inner starting point. That quiet inner place is always there, whether you are in contact with it or not.¹

This idea of a central core of stillness, an area of calm in the storm of humanity is a common tenet in both Zen and Taoism.

In actor training the focus of the work on the craft of acting begins with relaxation. The quiet allows students to listen to themselves and their bodies. This marks the beginning of learning, of self-awareness. Actors must come to know the life force that moves within them and as with the spiritual student this awareness leads directly to the breath. The goal for both is the same. With focused concentration on the breath recognition occurs of "the living current" moving through the body.² Whether we call this meditation, relaxation, or creative visualisation, it forms the basis of most first year acting classes. It also provides the clearest evidence of a link to spiritual practices by placing the focus on the breath.

Dr. Chang Chung-yuan in his book *Creativity and Taoism* describes the breathing technique common to Taoist Yoga:

In Taoist breathing a slow, deep, rhythmic inhaling and exhaling is a basic requirement in the early stages of training. When air is taken in, it is to be sent as

¹ Joseph Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor* (New York: Atheneum, 1980) 66-67.

² Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism* (New York: Julian, 1963) 102.

deep as the abdomen. It is for this reason that the kidney centre beneath the navel is called the sea of breath.³

Zen breathing is very similar:

The stress is upon the out-breath, and its impulse from the belly not the chest. This has the effect of shifting the body's centre of gravity to the abdomen so that the whole posture has a sense of firmness, of being part of the ground upon which one is sitting. The slow easy breathing from the belly works upon the consciousness like bellows, and gives it a still, bright clarity. . . The air is not actively inhaled; it is just allowed to come, and then, when the lungs are comfortably filled, it is allowed to go once more.⁴

David Smukler, Canada's leading voice teacher is on the faculty of York University and Head of the National Voice Intensive. His mantra to students follows this pattern exactly as he tells them to, "let the cool air drop in, turn warm inside and release out warm."⁵

The following exercise is indicative of this technique and contains obvious reflections back to Taoist and Zen breath exercises. They are excerpted from David Smukler's vocal warm up:

Sitting on the floor . . . legs rounded in front . . . establish breath flowing in sacrum and mid-brain before releasing forwards . . . Close your eyes: Observe the sounds around you. Think of past experiences. Observe your feelings. Permit the breath to flow without control. . . Imagine that in your pelvis there is a swamp of emotions. Allow one of those emotions down there to find a touch of sound.⁶

³ Chung-yuan 21

⁴ Glen Park, *The Art of Changing* (Bath UK: Ashgrove Press, 1989) 226.

⁵ Smukler, Personal interview, 2 June 1993.

⁶ Smukler.

Smukler believes that breathing this way allows the breath time to travel to the belly that is, in Buddhism, the emotional centre of the body. In this way the actor, who is true to the reality of the moment, need not think about how the words will sound, he simply has to breathe. The breath carries the messages into the body, receives an impulse from the belly and then can flow up and out as speech. In *Zen and Japanese Culture* Daisetz T. Suzuki says:

The Japanese often talk about 'asking the abdomen' or 'thinking with the abdomen'. The head is detachable from the body, but the abdomen, which includes the whole system of the viscera, symbolises the totality of one's personality.⁷

2. The Swamp

The National Voice Intensive is, as its name suggests, a rigorous five-week workshop bringing together forty-eight performers and a dozen of Canada's premiere voice teachers. The central focus of the instruction is the teaching of breathing. From the very beginning sessions David Smukler and his staff instil the verbal and physical vocabulary necessary for the student to understand viscerally the philosophy being discussed. Through a series of exercises the lower belly is identified as the pivotal source of all vocal work. He refers to it as "The Swamp." That area of the body is sensitised by the employment of creative visualisation while the muscles of the abdomen and lower back are stretched and strengthened allowing the breath to descend into the belly and back ribs. A connection is then established, first with sound and then with words (using Shakespearean text as source material), between "The Swamp," breathing, and speaking. At first I found this to be disconcerting if not frightening because it removed my ability to engage my mind and my judgement in the process of creating a performance. But with practice I surprised myself by contacting a depth of emotion that I had previously been able to engage only by chance. My observation of the progress of others and myself convinced me that this freedom from prior control left the work more honest and more human. It was as if the words presented themselves to the speaker for the first time, the instant before they were spoken, all because the impulse was removed from your mind to your lower abdomen.

⁷ Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Ser. 64. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1959) 105.

And while my sample pool is by no means exhaustive there are Smukler trained or influenced voice teachers almost everywhere in this country (of Canada). And I found exactly the same attitude at Manchester Metropolitan University, Britain's largest University based conservatory school of Acting. There, Patricia Roy echoed fellow voice teacher Smukler, when she described her work to place the breath lower in the body to contact the emotional chakra or centre, which she refers to not as "the swamp" but as "mud." Whatever the terminology is being invented there is an underlying teaching goal to marry the physiological truth with metaphor. Roy said, "We have to constantly keep finding new ways to redefine our messages."⁸ The use of spiritual tools is one way to provide some structure for that process. It provides a methodology for observation without judgement and for the discovery of mental clarity. She describes that clarity in terms of ". . . a unity between mind, body, and breath."⁹

Smukler summed up his thoughts in an interview:

Teachers use the spirituality of other cultures to form a framework for the work because we have abandoned in this century any kind of real structure. The majority of the world has moved away from an organized system of belief. So they are without a structure to back up the events of life. Because we have lost all structure we have this gaping hole in us that was called spirituality. We look at the actor and we used to have a very strong spiritual tradition in our theatre. Even in the nonreligious theatre there were spiritual traditions. What has happened in the twentieth century, (Margaret Mead and others have talked about this), we have taken the arts and moved them out of the society, we've separated them, made them culture.

Our students come to us with wounds instead. They have all these experiences and psychological awareness and no way to process it, no structure. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the structure there are no structures to rebel against. So the religion and spirituality of the mid-twentieth century has become

⁸ Patricia Roy, Personal interview, 17 May 1994.

⁹ Roy.

psychology. And that's not working. People are looking at all the things we investigated in the twentieth century and are saying, "They are not working, they're not working." So you start looking at the other traditions, to help us get some sense of what is going on.¹⁰

For Smukler, using the spirituality of other cultures in his teaching comes out of the needs of his students and their mutual search for a structure. It is this structure that provides actors with the link between the psychological, the physical, and the intuitive.

3. Alexander

Perhaps no area of training benefits more from a diversity of approaches than the attempt to link the body to the mind and get away from the concept of rational thought as the source of creativity. The National Theatre School in Montreal is one of the oldest and most highly regarded training programs in Canada. Its sole purpose is to prepare people for the professional theatre. As the Alexander and Tai Chi instructor, Steven Glassman is completely dedicated to the idea that the mind and the body are one. And that a personal spirituality cannot be divorced from the craft of the actor because the choices you make as a person affect your work as an actor. It is therefore natural to equate the spiritual journey to the training journey. According to him:

Self-awareness is at the heart of almost any spiritual discipline and it is also at the heart of acting because you can't really develop the quality of listening, whether it is to your own intuition or to, on a physical level, another actor on-stage or your audience . . . if there isn't a sense of being connected to yourself and a sense of being centred. I would say that at the National Theatre School the first year is very much geared to exploration, opening up, taking risks . . . and self-awareness is the alpha and omega of it all.¹¹

¹⁰ Smukler.

¹¹ Steven Glassman, Personal interview, 12 May 1994.

While he feels his work has a spiritual component, it is not religious or even tied to a particular philosophy. Alexander, for example, developed his technique for very practical reasons – he had vocal problems. He came to believe that bad physical and mental habits were inhibiting his voice production. According to Glen Park in his book *The Art of Changing*, the Alexander Technique is a way of learning to use your mind and body well. It is a way of bringing the whole person into balance.¹²

Glassman's own spiritual work has taken him to Java and he also credited the time he spent in a Gurdjieff community as being seminal to his growth as a teacher because of its emphasis on discipline being the path to knowledge. For him, the Alexander technique was a simple and practical way to utilize those ideas.

It is the conflict between doing the task well and the desire to succeed that is often troublesome to western students who have been raised on the idea of "no pain, no gain". Their societal conditioning leads them to desire an end before they have even begun. This desire for result and the traps of old habits were the inspiration for F.M. Alexander to develop the technique that bears his name. To Steven Glassman at the National Theatre School, "it is the glue that holds the training together,"¹³ because of its emphasis on dealing with your own personal stress that can be applied to any class. "It becomes a way of dealing specifically with their bodies when a director says, 'just relax.'"¹⁴ Freeing the body also allows for a freeing of the mind that allows for release and development of the imagination. There is a shift from thinking about trying, to a concentration on the process. In a parallel to the Buddhist concept of freedom from emotions Alexander said:

Knowing how to stop demands a technique of inhibition in which refusal to give consent to habitual (subconscious) reaction is the basic means for change.

¹² Park 241.

¹³ Glassman.

¹⁴ Glassman.

It is the only reliable means by which man can overcome the effects of emotional 'gusts' which show themselves in prejudices, jealousy, greed, envy, hatred and the like . . .¹⁵

Glassman believes that his students are aware that the Alexander technique is about how you live your life; that it is about having a greater sense of exploration. This work provides a link between all the elements of the training because it is a way of working from your centre and staying connected to your body even in moments of stress.

Spirituality is about living your life as fully as you can and finding out what is essential, having a certain peacefulness inside which comes from self-awareness; you know who you are and what your capacities are. Having the courage to deal with your weaknesses and your fears is really a lot about acting. You have to have the courage.

Perhaps nowhere is the link between spirituality and Alexander technique more eloquently stated than in Glen Park's book *The Art of Changing*. The entire second half of the work focuses on maintaining an energy flow in balance and harmony. Park makes no apologies for his views that Alexander is a technique that has benefits for the whole person and not just for the body. For him it is more than a system of relaxation and body alignment. The world is, he says, "an energy dance, a dance of Shiva," and man is energy, therefore the Alexander technique can be a way of channelling that energy.¹⁶ His work has led him to the building blocks of both life and art. Of his students he says:

They notice changes of a fundamental kind taking place. These changes are difficult to put into words because they are about an aspect of life we don't often talk about. In a sense they are not about an aspect of life at all, but about the source of it.¹⁷

¹⁵ F. M. Alexander.

¹⁶ Park 196.

¹⁷ Park 196.

Students delve into a refined state of self-awareness where they can listen to themselves as if for the first time and without judgement about what is good or bad about their emotional responses to what they see. They can begin to make choices. If the information that influences these choices is the fiction of the play then it is easy to see why this technique has been so universally accepted in conservatory training programs.

What struck me most about Glen Park's book was not its thesis but the fact that it is a required text for first year students in Britain's largest University conservatory theatre training program, Manchester Metropolitan University. The students begin their studies with a clear textual link between spiritual growth and acting training. In my correspondence with Niamh Dowling, the program's Head, she had described the school as having a somewhat "holistic" view of actor training and pointed to *The Art of Changing* as a source.¹⁸

Dowling started the movement class I attended with an Alexander based relaxation/meditation session in which partners alternately assisted each other to relax by laying their hands on the part of the body in focus at the moment. The main point of the exercise seemed to be to make a firm connection from the sacrum to the occipital bone. One of the partners lay on the floor in a semi-supine position with their feet flat on the floor and their knees up. They were then encouraged to establish a flow of energy from their head to their pelvis through the spine. Once the flow was established they started to move around this axis of unity with the aid of creative visualisation and the constant contact of the partner.

Text was added to movement to integrate their voice work into their bodywork. The class then continued with the other partner repeating the process. Eventually the partners evolved a self-taught ritual form that contained just enough risk in the range of movement that concentration was required. When previously learned text was introduced old vocal patterns were broken by the unique physical relationship brought about by the repetition of the form. By the end of the class it was a complete integration of the body, the voice, and the actor that had

¹⁸ Niamh Dowling, Personal interview, 17 May 1994.

incorporated elements of meditative breathing, the discipline of Tai Chi, and Alexander's rejection of old habits.

Much of today's actor training needs to focus on this inner state because by the time students reach a conservatory school in their early twenties they have been conditioned by society to distrust structure and belief systems. Brian Doubt, former instructor at Canada's National Theatre School and currently on the faculty of Concordia University, put the challenge facing acting teachers this way:

Students come to class 'in their heads', with a certain intellectual preoccupation. So one of the challenges is to get them to make a connection between the mind, the body and the emotions. This intellectual preoccupation makes itself manifest by students' behaviour: cynical, not trusting, not comfortable, not aware of physical idiosyncrasies, unsure of their emotional life and with a separate body and mind.¹⁹

It is this separation of mind and body that perhaps provides the chief rationale for incorporating spiritual discipline and methods into actor training. The goal is to ground actors in their bodies and to the earth for without a strong sense of centre we have no base from which to travel. Without a strong sense of self there can be no starting point for training because knowledge of the flow of energy within our bodies is essential in order to expand our emotional depth or the range of our movement without a crippling waste of effort.

4. Sharing Circles

Regardless of how much we focus on and nurture the individual artist in training, Theatre is a collaborative art form. I would argue and I think that the majority of persons reading this paper would support my contention that a safe and familiar environment contributes to better work. We need only look at the work of the world's repertory companies as well as those smaller companies whose members study and work together for years to see

¹⁹ Brian Doubt, Personal interview, 13 May 1994.

the benefit of a group of artists maturing together. Yet in our studios and rehearsal halls where time is often as short as a few weeks how do we create that feeling of community? For this I will humbly offer my own solution.

My solution is to start classes and rehearsals each term with a Sharing Circle. By definition it is self-explanatory. The class sits in a circle and on succeeding days begin to introduce themselves to the group. Turns are taken and "the floor" given by means of the possession of a symbolic object. The First Nations people of my home province would use a 'Healing Stick.' While some teachers might use a crystal, I prefer to use a Nerf soccer ball. I start with simple non-threatening things, e.g. describe three things about yourselves. This culminates on the third day with intimate family stories of an event that transformed your life. By 'forcing them to both share by talking and share by listening, I am able to create a sense of bonding that jump-starts their sense of both safety and imaginative freedom. It is something they do together that others have not. They are closer and less inhibited around each other for having done it.

I used this method without giving it a name for years until one of my students started referring to it as a Sharing Circle. A prime example of what I am talking about occurred recently at the start of a special summer course. It was special in that two-thirds of the class were Aboriginal students and the remainder were Hutterites. (If you are not familiar with this group they are communal farmers of German background: as an oversimplification, think mechanised Amish.) The work we did in the circle at the beginning of the course allowed us all to achieve common ground. Both communities have surprising similarities in sense of isolation, larger families and a strong faith in God to name just a few.

Conclusion

Actors need to have available all the possibilities of human character starting with their own. We train in order to make ourselves more aware actors. Since the actor's instrument is himself we must first become more aware human beings. We do not need to teach actors that

their work must have the control of reason or rational thought -- they come with that naturally. They know that whatever their intuition, their work must submit to the form of the role they are preparing. However, in training, where no opening night lies in wait, they need help to get in touch with an inner life.

There are limits to what can be achieved by rational thought. "In the process of approaching reality we inevitably reach a stage which is beyond thought, where mere intellection becomes helpless and we can only intuitively experience it."²⁰ Actors must have faith in their own intuition and talent. Without it they will lack the courage to create.

²⁰ Chung-yuan 102.