

# Notes on the SKINNER RELEASING TECHNIQUE

by Joan Skinner, Bridget Davis,  
Sally Metcalf, Kris Wheeler

*The following article describes the Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT). SRT is an innovative approach to dance training developed by Joan Skinner beginning in the early 1960's. This technique is taught by the American Contemporary Dance Company (ACDC) primarily in Seattle, Washington. For more information concerning their programs, contact: ACDC, P.O. Box 1164, Seattle, Wa. 98111; (206) 623-2232.*

Those of us who study and teach SRT have often been asked by students and acquaintances to talk and write about it. This has never been easy. The nature of Releasing is discovered in the doing. It is a nonverbal process. As all who are involved in the arts realize, language can be inadequate when we try to define creative process. Consequently, very little has been written about SRT. There is a Masters Thesis available from us, written by Bridget Davis through the University of Illinois. This article is, in part, an abridgement of that thesis. We hope this effort is descriptive of at least some of the less ephemeral aspects of Releasing.

It might be interesting for the reader to know something of Joan Skinner and her evolution of the technique. Ms. Skinner has a broad professional background. Among many other dance experiences, she was a member of the Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham Dance Companies. Beginning in 1963, she spent three years working alone. She applied to her own dancing, principles of alignment and movement that she had experienced while studying the

Alexander Technique. In 1966, while searching for ways to teach what she had found, she discovered the use of imagery to be a powerful means of conveying kinesthetic information.

At the core of the Skinner Releasing Technique is the premise that dance is a kinesthetic art. In other words, the raw material of the dancer's art is the kinesthetic sense. The roots of 'kinesthesia' are 'kinein', to move, and 'aesthesia', to perceive. The perception of movement, then, cannot be divorced from the movement itself. SRT can be described as a system of kinesthetic training which refines the perception and performance of movement through the use of imagery.

## IMAGERY AND ITS APPLICATION TO MOVEMENT TRAINING

The image as described by Suzanne Langer is a "mental picture of something. . . a symbol; an embodiment. . . a vivid representation,"<sup>1</sup> which "formulates a new conception for our direct imaginative grasp."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the image has great potential to communicate nonverbal information such as kinesthetic data. Therefore, the use of imagery is also extremely effective in movement training. For example, imagery is helpful when we are orienting ourselves in space, as motor, kinesthetic, and visual inputs must be quickly integrated.<sup>3</sup> An image makes possible the simultaneous processing of diffuse inputs.

Simultaneous integration involves an intuitive rather than an intellectual apprehension. Intuition is used here in the sense that the Italian psychiatrist, Roberto Assagioli, uses it in his book, *Psychosynthesis*:

emptying

*We will consider intuition mainly in its cognitive function, i.e., as a psychic organ or means to apprehend reality. It is a synthetic function in the sense that it apprehends the totality of a given situation or psychological reality. It does not work from part to whole—as the analytical mind does—but apprehends a totality directly in its living existence.<sup>4</sup>*

Thus, in SRT the image serves as the carrier of a patterned whole of information—a metaphor for kinesthetic knowledge—which "formulates a new conception for our direct imaginative grasp," and this metaphor is apprehended intuitively rather than analytically.

The physiology of movement further underscored the use of the intuitive mode in kinesthetic training since much of the mechanics of movement are unconscious and not immediately subject to the control of the analytical mind. According to Mabel Ellsworth Todd, author of *The Thinking Body*, movement is more subject to mental pictures than to conscious direction. She explains:

*When doing exercises under instruction we are apt to think that we move or direct the moving of muscles. What actually happens is that we get a picture from the teacher's words or his movements and the appropriate*

action takes place within our bodies to reproduce the picture. The result is successful in proportion to our power of interpretation and amount of experience, but most of all perhaps the desire to do. In any case, the final response is automatic and not the result of any consciously directed movement of particular muscles. It is the result of a combination of reflexes, no one of which can be selected as in itself "causing movement" or patterns of movement.<sup>5</sup>

The use of imagery in kinesthetic training has been corroborated by the

*coordination of muscle action whose resultant is the line of action of forces at play in the imagined situation.*<sup>6</sup>

If students attempt voluntary control they only "impose their own neuromuscular habits on the movement. This imposition interferes with the changes that can be made in muscular coordination just through imagined action." One of Dr. Sweigard's most famous statements is: "Movement resides in the thinking, not muscle action."<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Sweigard points out that trying to place or force the body into a given position, i.e., tuck the hips under, pull the stomach in, only "results in a corresponding deviation of some other part or parts of the structure in accordance with the pattern

image is designed to allow greater freedom in the hip socket. In this exercise, students lie on the floor with knees flexed, feet flat on the floor. They imagine a string attached to the center of each knee extending toward the ceiling, and supporting the weight of each leg. The strings open each knee, one at a time, sideways toward the floor and then return the knees to their beginning position. With practice, the legs are freed from the pelvis, facilitating turnout and greater flexibility in the hip socket. This exercise helps students experience effortless movement of the legs.

Examples of totality imagery which cultivates an overall experience of effortlessness are:

*Tumbling in an environment of moving air: As the students lie on the floor they imagine the sensation of air brushing their skin, the floor beneath them becomes an airy cushion. In the*

opening

softening

enveloping

emerging

work of Dr. Lulu E. Sweigard of the Dance Department at the Julliard School of Music in New York City. She discovered that movement training is not dependent on movement per se. When the students are motionless, if they are working with appropriate images, they are still engaged in an intense movement learning activity. In her article, "Psychomotor Function as Correlated with Body Mechanics and Posture," Dr. Sweigard concluded that imagined movement is the most effective means for educating the neuromuscular system:

*Mental activity, then, especially that in which the thought of movement is involved, is the most effective means employed thus far to recondition neuromuscular action patterns in the body. Such mental activity can be encouraged in a variety of ways. The key to each, however, is mental imagery, that is, visualization of an imaginary situation. Teaching can and should proceed in a manner which will lead the student to think in terms of concrete images. As this is achieved, image-directed muscular responses tend to occur. When no voluntary aid is given by the subject (i.e. any physical effort or movement), concentration on a mental image promotes a*

of muscular limitation of free movement in the joints. . .It accounts for many of the faults of position and movement which plague the dancer."<sup>8</sup>

As Ms. Skinner realized the effectiveness of imagery in movement training, she found it necessary to establish a learning environment where the dancer's technical growth becomes a creative process of individual discovery.

#### THE PEDAGOGY OF IMAGERY

The pedagogy of images in SRT serves as a structure of metaphors for kinesthetic experiences. Skill with image forming grows with practice. We select imagery carefully according to the student's level so that it progresses from the simple to the complex, the gross to the fine, and the one-dimensional to the multi-dimensional as the student becomes more sophisticated.

The images at the basic level fall into two categories: specific and totality imagery. Specific imagery is concerned with segmented movement patterns, while totality imagery cultivates an overall state in which an integration of multi-dimensional awareness is realized. An example of a specific is the kneestrings image. This

*mind's eye, they picture the limbs being filled with flowing air. Currents of air begin to move the whole self both in the imagination and actually. Finally, the air and the dancer, in a state of buoyancy, roll and tumble together into and out of the floor.*

*Tumbling in an imaginary weightless chamber; legs, arms, skull, all are floating, buoyant. There is no up, no down. There are only inwardness and outwardness. Movement is effortless even as the dancers balloon off the walls of their weightless environment.*

Students eventually can become so captured by the totality that its environment becomes real—so real that the feeling state evoked by the image is experienced almost as if it were actually happening.

These feeling states should not be confused with dramatic interpretations of the images. Rather, they are experienced more as an immersion or

complete identification with the imagery. "Feeling state" is used in the sense that Suzanne Langer speaks of it. It denotes all that can be felt "from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement, repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling tones of a conscious human life."<sup>9</sup>

In working with totalities a certain loss of orientation is often experienced. This loss of orientation gives the opportunity for a fresh, unconditioned response which allows new kinesthetic patterns of muscle use to emerge. Once these patterns are experienced they automatically begin to be absorbed into the individual's kinesthetic functioning. An example from a class journal might be illuminating. The following is a student's description of her experience with a breath and air totality:

*The whole body becomes one cellular, like an amoeba—one*

*pulsing, breathing, expanding, contracting, liquid unity. Bones and muscles spread out on the floor like spilled water. With every inward breath I seem to take in the whole atmosphere and then breathe it out again, taking in and letting out the whole sky. The whole body becomes a breathing organism like an enormous bellows—breathing in space and energy, breathing out a release of tension in a rush of air. . . Definitions get lost: me—body—mind—atmosphere—room—up—down—moving—static. . . Rather than trying to perceive things, you become the perception and it releases you into a vast realm of experience.*

Effortlessness, immersion, disorientation, these experiences allow imagery to teach the dancer how to work *with* the body rather than in spite of it. In SRT, imagery is applied

toward the realization of four specific principles of technique: *multi-directional skeletal alignment, multi-directional balancing, economy, and autonomy*. We refer to these as the principles even though they are not necessarily unique to SRT.

#### THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF RELEASING

**Multi-directional skeletal alignment.** As in other techniques, SRT views correct alignment of the skeleton as a crucial foundation upon which the fundamental and qualitative movement potential of a dancer rests. If someone dances with a hyperextended "swayedback" the quality of their movement is inherently limited by the way their natural flow of weight and momentum is interpreted through their skeletal structure. Alignment, however, is not viewed as a forced placement of skeletal parts in proper relationships, such as *tucking* the hips under and *pulling* the stomach in, or *keeping* the shoulders down. In other words, proper alignment is not a static position which is consciously held. Rather, skeletal alignment is viewed as a dynamic process of continual adjustments to changes of weight in space. This process lies beneath conscious control. SRT teaches alignment through suggesting the existence of certain directional

patterns within the skeletal structure which operate throughout the continual adjustments of bones and muscles during movement. The directional patterns are: 1) the head floats off the top of the spine; 2) the shoulders drop and fall open to the sides; 3) the ribs drop toward the feet; 4) the spine lengthens; and 5) the back widens. These patterns guide the student in experiencing alignment which gives the greatest freedom and coordination in movement. They are not forced but rather come into play gradually in response to the influence of imagined movement.

**Multi-directional Balancing.** In SRT, contrary to many dance techniques, no one stationary center of balance is used. Joan Skinner writes:

*Balancing on two feet becomes a multi-directional, multi-dimensional experience in space. There is not, as found in traditional methods, a singular reference point for balancing, such as a set of muscles, a particular center of the body, or a concept of upness and downness. (In a space age, there is no up or down.)<sup>10</sup>*

Balance is also viewed as a dynamic process since shifts of weight cause shifts in actual centers of balance. This view is analogous to the implications of Einstein's theory of relativity which advises the scientist to stop looking for any absolute, stationary frame-of-reference in the universe. The only constant is change.

**Autonomy.** In order to allow the multi-directional patterns full play, the limbs and torso must have the ability to move autonomously; that is, the movement of the arms or any other part in any direction does not interfere with the operation of other directional patterns. Even as the arms move above the body and extend out into space, the other directional patterns continue undisturbed. Furthermore, movement anywhere in the body does not have to block breathing. The breath can also be autonomous and unbound.

**Economy.** Closely associated with the principle of autonomy is the concept of economy. A given movement uses only the necessary

muscles with the minimum expenditure of energy. Thus, one does not tighten the shoulders to raise the arm, or hold the breath to extend the leg.

#### THE RELEASE OF EXCESS TENSION

In Professor Skinner's exploration, she discovered that excess tension is the most common cause of inability to realize the Releasing principles discussed above. The twentieth century person exhibits a variety of tension patterns: hands are gripped, breathing is held, jaws are clenched,

spinning

illumination

falling

reverberation

shoulders are hunched. The list of tension patterns and even tension diseases is long. For the dancer, in particular, excess tension can cause idiosyncratic alignment problems, constricted breathing, and inflexibility. Not only is proficiency of movement greatly hindered, but so are clarity, fluidity, and vitality. In SRT, the student kinesthetically releases patterns of excess tension in order to realize the principles of multi-directional alignment and balance, autonomy, and economy. This is accomplished through the use of imagery and exercises called graphics, which give students an intimate awareness of their own patterns of tension. An example of a basic graphic for the head and neck follows: the students lie on the floor and place their hands at the base of the skull in back, feeling for any changes in tension as they move their heads and/or limbs, as they come to a sit and stand, and as they travel.

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. "For instance," Professor Skinner explains, "by working within an imagined state of weightlessness where there is no problem with the pull of

gravity, a dancer can let go of muscles usually gripped as if necessary to hold one's balance."

#### A RELEASING CLASS

An introductory Releasing class includes guided specific and totality image work. The students very often receive imagery while lying on their backs, knees flexed, feet flat on the floor, arms open to the sides. While on the floor, students are picturing the images in the mind's eye, absorbing them kinesthetically. After a period of floor work, the students take the image into improvised movement or

movement actions suggested by the teacher. Also included are graphic exercises. These help the student either to cultivate an awareness of tension patterns or, with the help of a partner, to experience ways of moving they cannot yet master on their own, such as the suspension of the skull or the legs dangling. Exercises that develop sensory acuity are also taught. Frequent discussions and the keeping of journals are an important part of class work as well.

At the beginning levels of SRT, the emphasis is on fundamentals of movement basic to dance and the application of the kinesthetic principles of Releasing to learning those fundamentals. When students move, they are working with the dynamic processes of alignment, balance, autonomy, and economy. Students do not begin to polish their movement until they can do so in harmony with these principles. For instance, they do not attempt to extend their feet until they can do so without unnecessarily tightening muscles in the leg and pelvic girdle.

An atmosphere that encourages an

SRT, Professor Skinner writes:

*Ideally, movement seems to be more skeletal than muscular. The muscles appear to be lengthened and wrapped around the bones rather than contracted or gripped. The joints give the appearance of having space in them and the limbs of being unbound though belonging to the torso. There is a suspended relationship to gravity which can be likened to the suspension of a dust particle in a shaft of sunlight.<sup>11</sup>*

While imagery and the technical principles to which it is applied in class work have been discussed fairly thoroughly above, the Releasing process and the impact of imagery on that process has not been defined. Paradoxically, one of the most difficult aspects of SRT to describe is the

penetrating

deepening

wonder

infinite

concept of "releasing" itself. However, regardless of its ephemeral nature, there are some things that can be said about it and we shall attempt to present them.

#### THE NATURE OF THE RELEASING PROCESS AND ITS AESTHETIC IMPACT

The concept of Releasing encompasses more than letting go of fixed points of muscular tension. It also implies a simultaneous allowing of new movement to emerge. As Professor Skinner says, "One releases immediate fixed states of being to become available to the aligning process. In turn, the aligning process releases psychophysical energy." The release of tension, of distorted alignment is, in effect, a release of perceptions, of preconceived ideas, of psychophysical habits which are manifested in alignment. In order to participate in the aligning process, one releases the tyranny of conscious control, of intellect, and of preconceived ideas, to experience the natural laws of movement as they apply to the human organism. When one becomes aligned more in harmony with these laws, a

new well-being and freedom are realized.

As implied by the above, the premise that mind and body are somehow separate is discarded in SRT. Instead, Joan Skinner uses the following metaphor:

*The human organism is seen not as a mind-body duality, but as a dynamic network of energies. The network is totally unified, yet within it are complex, diverse autonomous patterns and forms of energy. Although there are reverberations within the network of energies, there is no linear pattern of cause and effect.*<sup>12</sup>

In the Releasing process—in addition to the letting go of conscious control, intellectualization, and preconceived ideas—the imagination is released. Students, as they work, do not simply absorb in rote fashion the

playful

transparent

timeless

images that are given in class. They may often experience images which come to them spontaneously. These images arise seemingly of their own accord, and yet, they can be very much in tune with the individual's kinesthetic make-up and the Releasing principles being studied. Even at the first presentation of an image by the teacher, the student may spontaneously experience a personalized version. These personal images emerge as metaphors of the principles the student is working with at that time. In a way, the imagination can be said to be actively improvising on the images that are given, making them relevant to the needs of the student's process at any given moment.

When the imagination is tapped in this way, students are carried into their own creative learning process, one change giving birth to another and so on. In this sense the Releasing technique becomes a self-propelling aesthetic process. Image work itself is a creative undertaking. Immersion in a totality, for example, can be a profound aesthetic experience. This impact is lucidly explained by Suzanne Langer in her description of the aesthetic experience:

*What it does is formulate our conceptions of feeling and our conceptions of visual, factual, and audible reality together. It gives us forms of imagination, and forms of feeling, inseparably; that is to say, it clarifies and organizes intuition itself. . . Aesthetic intuition seizes the greatest form, and therefore, the main import, at once.*<sup>13</sup>

Thus when a student becomes the image, its wordless and dynamic form is experienced. In this way, the image forming process develops the student's aesthetic sensibility.

When students reach the point where they are self-propelled through a dynamic process of change within the context of the Releasing principles, when they are relatively free from the interference of intellect, and prejudice, when their immersion in image work is total, students can be said to be "working in process." Thereafter, they need less moment-to-moment guidance, because their own process has taken over. When dancers

are working in process, they have a sense of being danced rather than performing the dance. Personal idiosyncracies and affectations disappear, leaving only the dance. When this state of transparency is realized, the awareness of one's dancing is no longer experienced as a dialogue between consciousness and the body, but rather as an expression of the psychophysical unity of the dancer. As one student observed earlier, "Rather than trying to perceive things, you become the perception. . ." Another writes:

*I feel purer and more complete movement today while spinning and letting the spinning move me so that I can travel with it. . . Letting the movements do you rather than you doing the movements. . . I can feel the spinning take me over as I ease out of the picture and leave only the spinning.*

An analogy can be made to the Zen painter's experience when "the hand that guides the brush has already caught and executed what floated before the mind at the same moment the mind began to form it, and in the end, the pupil no longer knows which of the two—mind or hand—was responsible for the work."<sup>14</sup>

In the aesthetic of SRT, the absence of affectation is considered a fundamental attribute of a fine dancer in the sense that movement is not dependent on "personality" or stylization. The energy lies not in the dancer making the movement or in portraying the movement, but in the nature of the movement itself. When dancing comes out of a state of psychophysical unity and is beyond premeditation, it is transparent to the spirit of each movement and to the unique spirit of the mover. Then the dance reverberates through the body as unobstructed as music vibrates through the instrument.

## CONCLUSION

It is toward this end, realizing the transparency of an artist's spirit, that Releasing has evolved. Perhaps this goal is no different than that of any great dancer of Ballet, but the means,

the technique, is decidedly original. The technical facility of the people in the American Contemporary Dance Company illustrates the feasibility of Releasing in training dance artists. Students, dancers and non-dancers alike, take great pleasure in the process of discovery stimulated by Releasing. This speaks for SRT's relevance in developing an awareness of the self as a vital, creative, moving being.

While dance has been a focal point in the evolution of Releasing, it has gradually become clear that the work has much broader applications, many of which have scarcely been tapped, such as healing, sports skills, psychotherapy, voice, and more. Even in the field of dance, we find that the technique constantly changes and grows, revealing more that we do not yet know. Consequently, while Releasing itself is a dynamic process of changes,

the teaching of SRT is in a constant state of evolution as well—but such is the nature of all process, of all vital life. We do not know what the future of Releasing holds, or the extent of its applications, but in our own processes we find that we are somehow, in some way moving in greater harmony with ourselves and our universe. It is a source of constant inspiration to us that even after fifteen years of conscientious development, the Skinner Releasing Technique is still young, fresh, and growing. e.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, (College Edition; New York: World Publishing Company, 1960), p. 805.
2. Suzanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 23.
3. Robert E. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1972), p. 79.
4. Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis*, (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 217.
5. Mabel Ellsworth Todd, *The Thinking Body*, (2nd Edition; New York: Dance Horizons, Inc., 1972), p. 33. See also Pamela Matt, Mabel Ellsworth Todd and Barbara Clark: *Principles, Practise, and the Import for Dance*, (unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1973).
6. Lulu E. Sweigard, "Psychomotor Function as Correlated with Body Mechanics and Posture", *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Ser. 2, Vol. II (May 1949), p. 246.
7. ( ), "The Dancer's Posture", *Impulse*, (San Francisco: Impulse Publications, Inc., 1971), p. 38.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 41-42.
9. Suzanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art*, p. 15.
10. Joan Skinner, "An Organic Approach to the Training of Dancers and the Aesthetic Education of the Layman", (unpublished essay, 1969).
11. Joan Skinner, notes to the author, February, 1974.
12. ( ), notes to the author, January, 1974.
13. Suzanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 397.
14. Eugene Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 63.

waiting

## FIRST AID

to

movement  
related  
injuries

by Randy Raine-Reusch

A sprain, strain, fracture, or dislocation can occur anywhere and at anytime. A poorly treated or untreated injury can often cost a dancer unnecessary time spent in recovery. Therefore, a knowledge of movement related first aid insures immediate care and rapid recovery. The following is a general explanation of athletic first aid, and its applications.

Rest, ice, compression, and elevation, the first letters of which spell RICE, the key word to remember for any movement related injuries. →