

Bartenieff Fundamentals: Demystifying dualities

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Based on patterns of total body connectivity, this system suggests a process of “re-rooting” through a regressive visit to developmental patterns of movement, demystifying dualities such as In and Out, Here and There, Intension and Expression, Want and Act, Body and Mind... and offering a clear understanding of how our “living instrument” is always making “connections” (connections between body-parts, with the environment, the space and other people).

Tadashi Suzuki uses as key concept for his theatre technique the phrase “animal energy”, which directly connects to what he calls a “re-rooting” process: “Encouraging animalistic sensitivity shifts the performance away from being an aesthetic entertainment and towards a transgressive interactive event”. (Suzuki, 2002: 5)

According to Peggy Hackney, through the application of Bartenieff fundamentals, adults are given “the chance to choose to return to and to remember aspects of their movement that moved out of conscious awareness when those aspects were integrated into larger movement patterns in the normal process of growth and development”. (Hackney, 2002:20)

Within this framework, I cannot avoid tracing a parallel between Suzuki’s “re-rooting” and the “re-remembering” encouraged by Bartenieff Fundamentals. The application of Bartenieff Fundamentals leads to a kind of “regression” (in psychoanalytical means) that promotes a dive into one’s individual sphere. Through this enclosure in the physical individual self, one can find the support he needs to start spreading out of his physical individuality into the outer world again, interacting with the environment and other people. And this, under Suzuki’s terms, is a proper “transgressive interactive event”.

But before one starts going out of his comfort zone to explore the world outside, he has to make sure his “home” is stable enough and will be there for him once he decides to come back. Achieving stability in the infrastructure, one’s “grounding”, is the key of a gate we can always open and close, being able to go out and back in whenever we chose to: “I can go out of my core because I know I can return.” (Hackney 2002: 67)

Bartenieff listed 6 basic patterns of total body connectivity, which we acquire along our developmental lines: (i) breath support, (ii) naval radiation/core-distal connectivity, (iii) spinal movement/head-tail connectivity, (iv) homologous movement/upper-lower connectivity, (v) co-lateral movement/body-half connectivity and (vi) contra-lateral movement. “Patterns”, in this context, are “habitual ways of organizing the body”, “plans which our neuromuscular system develops for executing movement sequences” and establishing relationships with other people and the environment. (Hackney, 2002: 13)

The first two basic patterns, Breath support and core-distal connectivity, are structural to the following ones. They dictate the way one will relate to its own living instrument and start developing at a very early stage of life: “As the first developmental pattern in the infant, breathing is the foundation, ground base, for all patterns which follow” (...) “Core support for limb-torso connections is available to us expressly because those internal body connections have already been explored and strengthened in actual movement while in utero.” (Hackney 2002: 52, 69)

Naval radiation or core-distal connectivity is an organizational mode that “begins in the centre core of the body and radiates out through the torso to the proximal joints, the mid-limbs and all the way to the distal ends of the extremities” (Hackney 2002: 68). According to Peggy Hackney, the core-distal pattern of movement “sets up a basic pattern of ‘Twoness’, as opposed to the ‘Oneness’ in the Breath pattern”. This “Twoness” would involve polarities such as: “Me-Not Me”, “Acceptance-Rejection”, “In-Out”, “Gather-Scatter”, “Towards-Away”, “Inside-Outside”, “Take in-Give Out”, “Receptive-Expressive”. (Hackney 2002: 82)

The Head-Tail Pattern of Total Body Connectivity or spinal movement is the “first one in the developmental scale that organizes the body by differentiating between Yield & Push patterning from Reach & Pull patterning.”¹ (Hackney 2002: 88) In order to go out of the utero, the baby pushes with his heels, stretching his body out in a movement where the head distances from the tailbone. Effective movement in later life should repeat this basic “Yield & Push” pattern as support for any actions involving the upper-body. Yield & Push Patterns relate to “grounding and sense of self”. They are the “confirmation of embodied existence” where the individual starts dealing with his own strength and with gravity. The “get away” effect (“to separate self from other”) this patterning provokes is a requisite for the development of the “personal kinesphere”. (Hackney 2002: 88)

Reach & Pull Patterns are the beginning of awareness of space and of the establishment of relationships with others. Through the “reach out”, they allow movement “beyond the individual”: “Reach & Pull, specially when supported by Yield & Push, makes it possible to go toward something or someone and thus is an important bodily aspect of ‘Choice’”. (Hackney 2002: 88)

Developmentally, the Individual first learns to Yield & Push (grounding) and then learns to Reach and Pull (access to space and the outer world). (Hackney 2002: 91)

¹ Here Hackney makes reference to Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s work on the basic process of embodiment of the embryological foundations of movement.

It is essential to point out that the core-distal connectivity as well the breath support are requisites for the adequate use of Yield & Push and Reach & Pull patterning as they set up the base for our connection to the distal ends: “Reach patterning both sets up and requires relationship with the outside environment (...) Aliveness in the distal ends – hands, feet, head and tail – is crucial for adequate Reach & Pull to function” (Hackney 2002: 119)

Homologous (upper-lower), co-lateral (body-half) and contra-lateral (cross body) movement are also organized according to these basic patterns of Yield & Push and Reach & Pull. Therefore, effective patterning should actually be part of a healthy development of an individual.

However, social-cultural, familiar or personal life events have deep influences in this process bringing out “ineffective patterning” and therefore ineffective movement: “Many people in our Western culture reach for goals but do not support their reach with the push which will get them there. They reach out from the Upper Body without supporting that reach with a push from the Lower Body. They are “over-reaching” (going beyond what they can support with their weight themselves) (...) On the other hand, some people learn to push but never to really reach out into space. They seem to stay with their own sphere and push themselves (and anyone else who enters their sphere) around. This person seems to be constantly in a struggle, pushing their own weight around, but not getting anywhere.” (Hackney 2002: 119)

The aim of the application of Bartenieff Fundamentals is to transform ineffective movement deriving from gaps in the developmental line or physical memory of an individual through a “regressive-progressive” process, which starts from the movement of the embryo and progresses further to actual adulthood, offering a clear understanding of organic patterns of movement and a stable “root” for the individual to grow further.

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