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“A Lamp in a Windless Place that Flickers not”: Some reflections on self-cultivation in Sri Lankan Theatre Acting.

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It is the junction at which the real and the imaginary, the concrete and the abstract, the physical and the mental meet

– Eugenio Barba ¹

The subject simultaneously the object and the object is simultaneously the subject

– Yuasa Yasuo ²

Introduction:

The phrase “a lamp in a windless place that flickers not” is found in the Indian classical poetry called *Bhagawad Gītā* (vi. 19). The metaphor of “burning flame without movements” refers to the Yogic meditator who sits and meditates while maintaining “stillness” in the upper body (Coomaraswamy, 2006). The Buddha’s *Samadhi* statue in Sri Lanka portrays a similar posture of *dhyāna mudrā*: Buddha sits cross-legged and the palms of the hands cross over each other and relax on the lap. The meaning of the Samadhic posture is the “state of a complete transparent mind” (Yasuo, 1993) that mingles the gap between mind and body.

The idea of “stillness of the body” has been widely identified by acting pedagogues as one of the key somatic qualities of the actor’s performing body. “stillness at the centre” (Benedetti, 1973), “body become all eye” (Zarrilli and Hulton, 2009), and “body-in-life” (Barba, 1989) are some of the

¹ BARBA, E. 1989. The Fiction of Duality. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 5, 311-314.

² YASUO, Y. 1987. *The Body: Towards an Eastern Mind-Body theory*, Albany State University of New York

few examples of how the idea of self-cultivation has been articulated in the Asian actor's art. Building upon the notion that the paradigms of actor training and soma-aesthetics³ (Shusterman, 2008) are culturally determined (Zarrilli, 2002), this paper attempts to explore how theatre actors cultivate bodymind through habituating performance scores in rehearsal praxis. In this paper I further argue that it is the "actional" and "somatic knowing" that an actor is accomplished in the attunement process.

To arrive at this point, I incorporate Sri Lankan actor Anasuya Subasinghe⁴ and my own embodied experience⁵ of habit formation in rehearsal praxis. Meanwhile Asian philosophers, namely Yuasa Yasuo and Nagatomo Shiganori have also provided key theoretical stances for this paper.

Self-Cultivation:

The practices of "self-cultivation" explore how Asian performer experiences the "transformation from provisional duality into a "bodymind oneness." The word *shugyō* in Japan and the word "Tapas" in India represents the same meaning of cultivation process of attaining bodymind, disciplining through esoteric bodily practices (Yasuo, 1993). The Sanskrit term *Tapas* further carries the meaning of "fire" or "mental heat." However, it may be understood as an energy that "gives birth, through training various capacities of the body, to awakening a new self (Yuasa, 1993 p.8).The

³ Contemporary body researcher Shusterman introduces the term "Somaesthetic." In the preface to his book *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, he explains that "I often prefer to speak of Soma rather than body to emphasize that my concern is with the living, sentient, purposive body rather than a mere physical corpus of flesh and bones" (Shustermann, 2008, p. Xii).

⁴ Anasuya Subasingha is a Sri Lankan contemporary actor who has started her theatre acting career at the very early age of her life. She has first started acting in English speaking theatre based in Colombo and started working in Sinhala Theatre which is the larger theatre practice in the country in her later acting career. Anasuya has gained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Dramatic Arts at the University of Waikato, New Zealand in 2004. She has won best supporting actress award at the State Theatre Festival in 2006 and Best Actress award in 2010. The author has acted with her in the theatre production "*Apasu Herenna Be*" (No Return) by Rajith Disanayake.

⁵ I have been working as a theatre and a film actor in Sri Lankan performance industry for nearly twenty years.

self-cultivation therefore is not just a theoretical assumption, but an “embodied practice” which should be realized through the body.

“Samadhi through continual sitting” and “Samadhi through continual walking” are two key methods of Buddhist self-cultivation practices that are being used in religious and performance contexts. In seated meditation practices, the body is set into a still posture; the meditator’s senses and their engagement with the outer environment are ceased. According to Zen Buddhist master Eisai, “all engagements are discarded, everything is put to rest; in body-mind oneness, there is neither movement nor stillness”(Yasuo, 1993).

“Samadhi through continual motion” is the “mountain worship method” known as “Kaihōgyō.” (ibid, p.20). The Cultivator walks continually through mountains, reciting Buddhist *sutras* (Texts) while keeping Buddha’s image in mind. As in the case of seated meditation, this state of “meditation in motion” attempts to achieve a “highly transformed state of consciousness through training the motor movement of the bodily organs” (Yasuo, 1993).

Stillness and “No Mind” in acting:

Japanese actor training in Nō theatre is based on the concept of self-cultivation developed by Japanese Nō master, Zeami Motokyo. Generally speaking, the amateur actor does not experience the smooth flow of psychophysical movements until she gets the full habituation of her bodymind integration. Zeami’s concept of the “flower” represents the culmination of this marriage of body and consciousness. He coined this state of being as the “no-mind” (mushin) or “emptiness”⁶ (kū) (Yasuo,

⁶ “No mind” or “emptiness” (Mushin) in Zeami’s theory of flower (hana) is very ambiguous concept. According to Yuka Amano, Zeami’s concept of flower (hana) is not original to him but derived from medieval Japanese poetry and literature. Along with the concept of flower, there is another key concept called “Yugen” which is related to the Hana. Yet these concepts according to Zeami are distinctively different. Yugen is the elegant beauty inherent in the actor’s body” while the beauty of the flower determined by the perceiver of the performance (Amano, 2011, p. 531). In Yuasa’s Eastern body mind analysis, Zeami’s notion of “flower” is analysed as a representation of the performer’s “self-forgetfulness” or the “bodymind oneness.” However this does not mean that the actor is hypnotically transcends to an unconscious level. Instead, Zeami’s argument is

1993) of the actor. This is further explained in a metaphor used in No theatre: “The centre of bodily movement is the “stillness” in the midst of dynamism, just as the centre pin of a top spinning at full speed remains stationary”(Yasuo, 1987). It is the body that is “apparent stillness filled with tremendous motion.” (Benadetti, 1973, p. 446).

Phillip Zarrilli demonstrates how Asian meditational/martial art can be beneficial to cultivate actor’s experience of “stand still while not stand still” (ibid). It is a bodily accomplishment that the actor learner cultivates through an assiduous daily practice. Zarrilli insists:

The accomplished practitioner is one who has achieved and is able to manifest in practice a *certain (internal and external) relationship to the specific acts*: the object of meditation for the practitioner of meditation, the target of the martial practitioner, *and the tasks within the actor’s “score.”* (Zarrilli, 2002, p. 191 *emphasis added*)

This accomplishment is the inter-involvement of the performer’s body with its ambience (Nagatomo, 1992).

Duality:

In my early acting career, most of the questions I asked myself started with the word - “how.” How to stand, how to be still, how to breathe, how to move and how to turn, are a few among them. These questions were germinated in relation to the body under scrutiny. Although this list can go on, the real issue is that the more you are conscious about your body, the more you are in trouble; the more you are in trouble, the more you are conscious about it. As Barba has once stated, this “duality body” need to be tamed “fragment by fragment, limb by limb, function by function to re-compose

that it is the ontological state which allows actor to observe her bodily being while her body and mind becomes oneness. Zeamy Motokyo has written nearly 20 treaties on Noh theatre and among them five texts are directly addressed on the notion of “flower.”

the “artificial-body”⁷ (Barba, 1989). Sri Lankan actor, Anasuya, articulates her experience of the duality in acting thus:

I remember the “awkwardness” that I experienced while I was doing the play apasu herenda be.⁸ During this project, my body and mind were continuously conflicting. It was a horrible experience. Animals for instance may not experience this duality because they work with their “animal instinct.” We can only experience this when our “animal instinct” is activated (Anasuya S 2012 pers.comm. 06 May).

According to my experience, the ability to work on a score may help actor to cultivate bodymind and further allows her to overcome the duality of bodymind. When Anasuya argues that she only could experience the wholeness of the body once her “animal instinct” is activated, She goes onto say that this amalgamation is gained as a primordial functionality which arises through the intertwining of bodymind. Yuasa identifies this phenomenon as the “*animal function*” consisted of sensory (eyes, ears) and motor movements (hands and legs) related to the sensory motor nerves system of the body (Shaner et al., 1989). When the actor’s body is moving and iterated within a score, her sensory and motor movements are constantly being trained. This generates the actor’s upper layer of consciousness that represents as animal function (Shaner et al., 1989).

Score and the Attunement:

Grotowski’s actor Richard Cieslak explains metaphorically how the actor maintains her “animal function” as inner life within a performance score:

The score is like a glass inside which the candle is burning. The glass is solid; it is there, you can depend on it. It contains and guides the flame. But it is not the flame. The flame is my inner process each night. The flame is what illuminates the score, what the spectators see through the score (Barba, 1995).

⁷ Barba does not intend to use the term “artificial body” to denote the human body as a lifeless object. His idea is in contrast to show how the human body cultivates another bodily nature, he calls “artificial” of “extra daily” body. In acting literature this body is widely known as a “second nature.”

⁸ “*Apahu Herenna Be*” (No Return) is a Sinhala language play written and directed by a contemporary Sri Lankan theatre director, Rajitha Disanayake. This play was first performed at the Lionel Wendt theatre, Colombo in 2008 and won several state theatre awards including best actor, best supporting actor, best direction and best play of the year in 2009 at the state Theatre Festival in Sri Lanka.

As Cieslak articulates, the actor's "inner life" or the "subscore" (Turner, 2004) comprises the attuned bodymind that actor experience while performing a certain score. Therefore the score for actor is not only a physical narrative, but an internal flame that is burning as a flame of creative urge. Enacting these scores, "one enters a certain relationship with the form/structure through one's cultivated perceptual/sensory awareness" (Zarrilli, 2007).

Both Phenomenology⁹ and the theory of attunement agree that the human body has a fundamental modality that prior to our conscious level, our body is already "engaged" with the world. In Nagatomo's terminology, the human body is always engaged with its "ambience"¹⁰ (Nagatomo 1992, pp.179-185). This mode of "engagement" is always "actional as well as epistemic." Merleau-Ponty also similarly states that our body is capable of understanding the world before we rationally speculate it (Kwant, 1963). This theory of attunement helps us to understand how the actor's body is pre-rationally engages with the performance score.

Engagement:

The performance score is a composition which constitutes somatic narratives.¹¹ It has a beginning, middle and end. Between these two ends, every subtle movement of the body is intertwined with each other and creates a tapestry of dynamic composition of movements. The Actor as both the composer and the player of this composition animate the score. This animation allows the actor to

⁹ Generally speaking Natomo's ideas are heavily influenced and developed through both Asian philosophy and European phenomenological tradition initiated by Edmund Husserl and later contributors such as Morris Marleu-Ponty and Jean Paul Sartre.

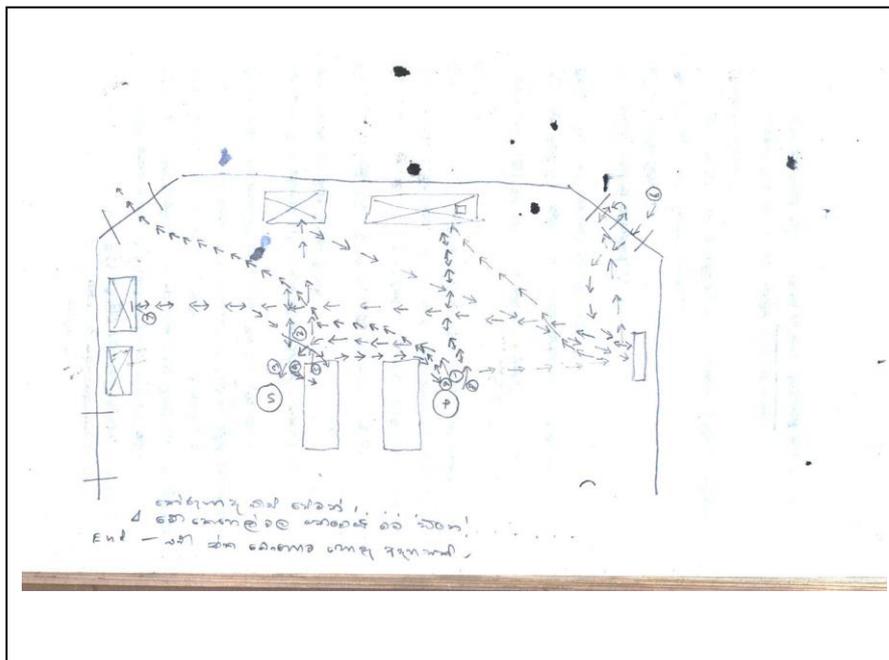
¹⁰ The word "Living ambience" in Nagatomo's analysis of "attunement" carries a specific meaning. In his seminal work "*Attunement through the body*," Nagatomo expands the idea of Living ambience" from "living things" to inanimate objects. He argues that inanimate objects also decompose and "turn into nothing and start again as a living being" (Nagatomo, 1992, p. 282). Therefore living beings and the inanimate object are covered with the word "living ambience.

¹¹ I use the word "somatic narrative" to denote the "physical score" or the tapestry of bodily movements interlaced to create a performance score.

engage with the score and attune with the body by inscribing repetition. These somatic repetitions sediment in the bodily musculature as sensory motor memory. This engagement finally unites the provisional duality of the body and mind intertwining the bodily “tranquillity” (Benedetti, 1973) of the actor. In the beginning of the actor’s task, every single movement seems “intentional” and forceful. Once the body is repetitively inscribed by the score, then the body learns to “inhabit” in it. Then the gap between the intentionality and the body becomes blurred.

This is one of my drawings of early performance scores that I used to sketch while rehearsing the play “Typist” by Murray Shishgal:¹²

¹² The play “Typist” by the American playwright Murray Shishgal (*Dawasa Thama Geune Ne*) was translated by S. Karunaratna and directed by Buddhika Damayantha. This play was first stage at the *Lumbini* theatre, Colombo in 1999 with the cast of Saumya Lyanage as Paul and Jayani Senanayake as Sylvia. This drawing is copied from a Sri Lankan play that Saumya has acted in. The play is *dawasa thama geune Ne* directed by Buddhika Damayantha in 1999. On the right side, the letter P indicates the character he played and the physical score drawn by him.



As this sketch indicates, these movement narratives in the scores are repeated many times in the rehearsal practice. During this process, my every subtle movement is habituated and sedimented as an ever growing sensory awareness. This awareness further is widened through my continual engagement with the score which provides “dynamic possibilities” (Zarrilli, 2007, p.645) for the me to play and improvise beyond the limits of the score. At this level, I do not repeat the sequence of the body narrative. Yet I am capable of expanding the somatic awareness by experiencing the transcendental nature of the body. This is when the actor experiences her “no-mind” as Zeami speculates. It is the unity of “bodymind oneness” that I experience as a “lived body.” This attunement is a transformation that occurs in the actor’s body from daily dualistic mode of existence to non-dualistic, “Samadhi awareness” (Nagatomo, 1992). Sri Lankan actor Anasuya again explains how her body is being accustomed to the performance score and is attuned accordingly:

I would like to take an analogy: engagement with the score is like a proposed marriage. How do you sleep with this complete stranger? But you have to make the marriage work. So what happens is that you get “accustomed” to it. And hopefully, if you are lucky, you will fall in love with him. However, you need to have a deep sense of interest towards the performance score. I try to find a sense of “comfort” that bringing you the sense of “enjoyment.” And for me, maintaining that deep sense of interest is again, I have to “enjoy” what I am doing. If I don’t enjoy, I know that my mind and body are not at unity. It is like a disappointing, horrible marriage! (Anasuya S 2012, pers. comm. 6 May).

In this analogy, Anasuya elaborates how the “somatic engagement” with the performance score needs to be deeply embedded within her flesh. This engagement brings her the sense of comfort and finally being unified with the sense of “enjoyment.” This sensation as I see is the sense of bodymind oneness or “extraordinary Samadhic awareness” (Nagatomo, 1992) that the performer experiences in her performance process.

Conclusion:

This paper has attempted to discuss the question of how actors attune their bodymind through engagement with the performance scores. In this somatology, actor’s provisional dualistic tendencies could arguably be reduced and altered into “bodymind oneness” which is exemplified by the “stillness” of the body. This stillness or tranquillity of the body is the “sensory motor knowledge” that the actor possesses as the knowledge of “how to stand still but not stand still”(Zarrilli, 2002). Further I have argued that it is the “Samadhi awareness” which actors experienced through intending with the performance scores. It is the actor’s cultivated body that “flickers not” on the stage.

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