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CREATING A NEW TEACHING TRADITION

**A thesis submitted to Loyola Marymount University
The University Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

by

Amy Guion

May 2009

CREATING A NEW TEACHING TRADITION

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To Tekla Kostek, for without you I would have never found my flow.

With deep gratitude,

Amy

PREFACE

I have the greatest respect for Mr. Balanchine. I grew up at the Pacific Northwest Ballet School where Balanchine was venerated, professionalism expected even from the very youngest levels, and competition among students was intense. When I critique the culture that has been built around his legacy, I do not mean to tarnish his reputation as a great choreographer. I do not singularly blame George Balanchine for a training method that has been a tradition since the time of Louis XIV. I simply have to analyze the type of training that I grew up with because it's what I know. It's all I know. My traditional ballet training is of the highest degree of excellence. I was gifted with a wonderful experience of thirteen years of professional ballet training. Even now, as a more recreational student of ballet, my teachers can see the strong foundation that my early ballet training ingrained into me. But, as with any method, there are places that can be improved, aspects tweaked in order to enhance the potential and experience of each dancer who goes through the system. Growing up, the teachers who trained me wanted me to succeed. I believe that if they knew ways to increase my confidence and improve my dancing and my life overall, they would have made every effort to teach me how to do these things. It is with these intentions of gratitude for my past, experiences that affect my present, and my hope for future generations of ballet dancers that I write this paper.

Introduction

In the United States, traditional ballet training, as demonstrated by schools which teach the Balanchine technique, focuses on memorization of physical movements and learning by imitation. Pre-professional ballet schools are inhabited by scores of eager young girls that intensely train their physical bodies with the hopes of being a prima ballerina someday. Students of yoga, on the other hand, explore balance within both the mind and body, with the goal of cultivation of the inner space through mastery of the physical body. The inner space is composed of mental thoughts and emotional feelings. It includes everything except for the physical body.

For their differences, ballet and yoga can be classified as flow experiences, or activities that require high levels of skill and are highly challenging. Flow¹, a sense of effortless action, balances the dichotomy of exemplary physical technique with a positive psychological experience. Teaching ballet dancers to explore the psychological aspect of yoga and the flow experience will enhance a dancer's abilities and make dancing more enjoyable. Ballet dancers should be taught to integrate principles of yoga into their traditional ballet training in order to strengthen both mental and physical capabilities and to increase the frequency of flow experiences. For our purposes, this paper will focus on issues that female ballet students and professional dancers face.

¹ Flow in this paper is not to be confused with flow in the context of Laban analysis. In this context, flow refers to the psychological idea of optimal experience. Please see pages 6, 15-19 for a more detailed explanation.

Ballet

The great choreographer George Balanchine trained in Russia, and upon his relocation to the United States in the 1930s, brought with him a longstanding tradition of ballet and how to train classical dancers. Many leading dancers from his original company have since established schools in the United States to pass on their training to the next generation of ballet dancers. This traditional, Russian-rooted ballet training focuses on memorization of movements and learning by imitation. The emphasis on the physical body creates an imbalance in the student which results in valuing the body over the mind.

Balanchine ballet technique is a term used to describe the style of ballet of George Balanchine which he developed and taught to his company and school, the New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet (SAB), respectively. Since his arrival in America, Balanchine revolutionized the idea of what ballet is and what ballet training is. Born and trained in Russia at the state-run Imperial Theater School of the Maryinsky Theater, "one of the world's greatest academies" (Dunning *viii*), Balanchine brought Russian training to America. Although he was adamant about wanting to create an American school, thus the name, School of American Ballet, "[w]hat the Russian influence did establish, however, was a teaching tradition" (11). Balanchine's school and other schools in the United States that teach Balanchine ballet technique, therefore, use Russian training principles to teach a decidedly American technique.

There is no doubt in the minds of critics and fans alike that strict Balanchine training, as found in schools such as the School of American Ballet (Balanchine's original

school in New York) and Pacific Northwest Ballet School (founded by Balanchine dancers in Seattle) results in proficient and physically skilled ballet dancers. Training in these pre-professional schools begins at a young age and continues until a student graduates from high school. At the School of American Ballet, "the children learn a standard Russian technique rooted in the ballet taught to Balanchine" (160). The core of traditional training is discipline. Ballet students are trained to imitate and follow directions. Children learn concentration and discipline as they must be on time to classes, wear a leotard in a color that reflects their level in the school, and learn the etiquette that goes along with the structure of the ballet class. Everywhere a dancer goes, the ballet class remains the same. A class begins at the *barre*², starting with *pliés*³, followed by *tendus*⁴, followed by *degagés*⁵, and continuing with set steps. The class then moves to the center floor where *adagio*⁶, *pirouettes*⁷, *petit allegro*⁸, and *grand allegro*⁹ occur.

Balanchine technique is very stylistically specific and has several distinct characteristics that distinguish it from other ballet techniques. Elise Reiman, a teacher at SAB, remembers that "[Balanchine] was very particular about small things. He

² "The horizontal wooden bar fastened to the walls of the ballet classroom or rehearsal hall which a dancer holds for support. Every ballet class begins with exercises at the bar" (Grant 15).

³ The opening exercise of ballet class; "bending of the knees" (88) repeated in all five classical foot positions of ballet.

⁴ An exercise for turnout of the legs and feet in which the toes of the working leg remain in contact with the floor throughout the exercise. The working leg moves front, side, and to the back.

⁵ An exercise for turnout of the legs and feet in which the toes of the working leg lift off of the floor slightly. The working leg moves front, side, and to the back.

⁶ "A series of exercises following the centre practice, consisting of a succession of slow and graceful movements...performed with fluidity and ease" (Grant 1).

⁷ "Whirl or spin. A complete turn of the body on one foot..." (84).

⁸ A series of small jumps done on the centre floor.

⁹ A series of big jumps, usually done on the diagonal. Ballet classes generally conclude with this combination of steps.

said he wanted *battement tendu* done a certain way. He had ways of doing *glissade*¹⁰ that he liked" (142). Other Balanchine technique-specific movements include: a straight back leg before *pirouettes*, a front spot during turns, and the face staying straight to the front during most combinations at the *barre*. Movement quality also differs from other techniques. Balanchine liked dancers who could move "fast and light and big, with an edge as sharp and clear as the facet of a diamond" (134) and classes reflected this by combinations being done at a faster tempo while retaining exact positions and technique.

Traditional training involves the physical body. Teachers will correct a student by physically molding her body into the right poses. Students strive to increase their extension of the leg in *developpé*¹¹ and mirrors are omnipresent to show a student what she looks like at all times. Muscles are visually analyzed; body figure is of the utmost importance. Suki Schorer, current head of SAB, comments that Balanchine "certainly believed that dancers learn by imitation" (5). A teacher demonstrates the combination and the students follow. The teacher may point out a student doing something either correctly or incorrectly, and other students are expected to observe then try the correction for themselves.

Rigorous and disciplined training has its benefits. Perfecting ballet technique can mean success in many other dance techniques such as jazz, modern, and hip hop. Many schools and colleges that emphasize modern or jazz require that each student also take ballet classes on a weekly, if not daily, basis. The commonly held belief in the dance

¹⁰ A small jump that involves weight transfer from side to side. The French term *glissade* means "to glide".

¹¹ A lift of the leg to the front, side, or to the back. The goal is to lift the leg as high as possible while maintaining turnout and hip alignment.

world is that a "dancer who could learn to dance the [ballet] classics that well was prepared technically to learn to dance anything" (6). Balanchine "knew the importance of such schooling, both to give the dancer a sound technical foundation and as a springboard to experimentation" (Dunning *viii*). Once a student learns ballet and "the rules", then he or she is more able to break them.

During Balanchine's time with the New York City Ballet and continuing to today, "[t]here came to be the 'Balanchine ballerina', a very tall, very young, very slender woman with long legs and supple feet, narrow hips, and a small head" (134). The profile of a typical Balanchine ballet dancer is "a child of the twentieth century" (134). Aspiring dancers can enter pre-professional schools by age five and may go on tour as early as age sixteen. A ballet career is short, ending in the mid-thirties. Jim and Ceci Taylor note that "if you are like most instructors and dancers, you actually devote little time to the impact of psychological issues on dance performance" (2). Young adults enter into high pressure, high intensity situations with great physical training, but little to no mental or emotional preparation. These young dancers are also unprepared for the reality of the performing world: perfect technique is not equivalent with dancing perfection. Prima ballerinas and principal dancers do not always have the best technique in a company. Instead, they have an air of the ethereal about them, a quality of movement that makes them irresistible to watch. Individuals like this are performers to the fullest degree-- something inside of them turns on when he or she dances for an audience. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls this experience "flow".

Flow includes a combination of some or all of the following concepts when describing an activity:

1. *Clear goals* (expectations and rules are discernible and goals are attainable and align appropriately with one's skill set and abilities).
2. *Concentrating and focusing*, a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention (a person engaged in the activity will have the opportunity to focus and to delve deeply into it).
3. *A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness*, the merging of action and awareness.
4. *Distorted sense of time*, one's subjective experience of time is altered.
5. Direct and immediate *feedback* (successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that behavior can be adjusted as needed).
6. *Balance between ability level and challenge* (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult).
7. A sense of personal *control* over the situation or activity.
8. The activity is *intrinsically rewarding*, so there is an effortlessness of action.
9. People become absorbed in their activity, and focus of awareness is narrowed down to the activity itself. (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde).

The physical manifestations of this quality are few--a turn of the head at exactly the right moment, a flick of the wrist just so. The performer takes herself to a new mental place. She is having the ultimate mind-body experience, during which she is able to translate emotion into movement. The distinguishing characteristic of the true performer is one who gives of herself to the audience. Tessa Cook, formerly with the Netherlands Dance Theatre, explains that "Through dancing, I have experienced how fantastic it is to give. You are full of love and...you are able to give that to other people. In dance you can

express all your emotions....I never needed to express myself in words” (Aalten 273). Performing is ultimately about giving. The transition from student to professional is the transition from self-centeredness to altruism.

This transition is what traditional ballet training does not prepare students for. They are often baffled because it is not a physical transition, it is a mental one. John Taras, a teacher at SAB, worries that “there is a concentration on legs and feet and body, and the dancers are trained very well. But I’m not sure if the head is that well trained” (Dunning 203). Because self-awareness is not emphasized in early training, it is difficult to figure out exactly how to develop this air of the performance. Students are also somewhat stunned to learn that perfect technique does not make the perfect dancer, because this is what they have been brought up to believe. As Francia Russell, former director of Pacific Northwest Ballet School, notes, “the technique has to be a given. We work so hard on it so that it can be really almost forgotten...” (Newman 206). Russell understands that technique is a component of dance, but it is not all of what comprises dance. The technique can be almost forgotten because it is ingrained in the body, and it is forgotten in favor of the performance quality.

Students often have a difficult time being flexible in their style of dance and with their technique. Technique is the starting point of most choreography, but choreographers almost always deviate from the traditional technique in order to create a piece that is new and exciting and different. Choreographers become famous by breaking the rules, not by following them. Traditional training teaches that there is only one right way. When asked to be creative and move in ways unfamiliar to the way they were trained, classical ballet

dancers can become tense and anxious. The new form that they are asked to do is breaking the sacred rules that they grew up with. I am a firm believer that technique classes do not prepare a dancer for rehearsals and new choreography, or even choreography from the Romantic period. Variations¹² are just as the name suggests, variations on ballet technique. We learn the rules in order to break them, and a ballet student never learns that it can be healthy and desirable to break the rules at the appropriate time.

I do not believe that it was the intention of the great ballet masters, such as Balanchine, to deliberately remove or exclude psychological education from the ballet schools. As Suki Schorer remembers, “[Balanchine’s] pride in us and his careful attentiveness to the details of how we looked helped us to become aware of how to ‘feel beautiful within’, a state of mind he thought essential for looking beautiful onstage” (8). Clearly, cultivating this inner space was crucial for Balanchine. Inner space refers to the mind, a place that many times is neglected or damaged by traditional dance training. There is a continuum between self-judgment and self-acceptance which dwells inside of the mind, or inner space. Unfortunately, dancers tend to lean heavily towards the side of self-judgment. ‘Feeling beautiful within’ as Schorer puts it, seems to lean more towards the self-acceptance side of the continuum, showing that Balanchine did care about the confidence and emotional stability of his dancers. He was also critical of them physically, as Gelsey Kirkland mentions in her biography “He did not merely say, ‘eat less’. He said

¹² A variation is a solo piece usually performed in the middle of a ballet.

repeatedly, 'eat nothing'" (Kirkland & Lawrence 57). This incident demonstrates that criticism and self-acceptance were both abundant in Balanchine's company.

However charismatic and morale-boosting Balanchine was, specific techniques for this emotional grooming were not recorded or passed down to other teachers. Perhaps it was simply that he had no curriculum for making a dancer feel good about herself; he simply inspired confidence in people. While that may have been helpful and productive for those dancers that he worked with in the New York City Ballet, teachers in the present day must strive to find other ways of inspiring confidence and challenging students to grow mentally and emotionally alongside their physical education. They must create a balance between criticism and praise so that students can learn self-critique, but also self-praise or pride in their dancing. Unfortunately, others that Balanchine worked with did not share his vision, as Lincoln Kirstein, the co-founder of SAB, went so far as to comment that "the idea of the well-rounded ballet student is not important....They don't require a great deal of intellectual stimulation" (Dunning 203).

Not surprisingly, traditional ballet training attracts and is a counterpart to body disorders. Students wear uniforms of tight fitting leotards and tights. Each student compares herself to other students, competing for individual attention from teachers. The physical body is explicitly critiqued by teachers. There is a high prevalence of eating disorders in ballet schools and among professional ballet dancers. Competition is fierce and "the struggle can drive a young dancer into...eating disorders to which...women dancers and dance students have been...more prone to than the general population"

(179). Aalten remarks that "Body control is one of the key elements in ballet" (271).

Desire for control or feeling out of control are also elements of eating disorders.

In ballet, perfection is the goal, physical perfection, to be specific. Perfection is a dangerous goal, one that cannot ever be totally achieved. For some dancers, this is a challenge. Mariet Andringa enthuses that "'It was great to work so hard with your body and to realize that you had become better. That is a great feeling, really addictive'" (271). For others, falling short of perfection is disheartening and produces anxiety, stress, and judgment. Gelsey Kirkland remembers that "When my mother found me in the dressing room after a show, I was usually in hysterics, in spite of applause and accolades. The reason was simple: success had become impossible on my terms" (Kirkland & Lawrence 93). Ballet dancers rate body esteem¹³, fitness esteem¹⁴, and self-esteem the lowest during a dance class compared with a dance performance or during a social activity (Van Zelst et al. 2004, 48). In the continuum between self-acceptance and self-judgment, more often than not, dancers lean heavily towards judgment.

Confidence is also at risk with traditional training. A lack of confidence greatly contributes to eating disorders. Low levels of self-confidence stem from lack of mental training in ballet schools. Education should be of the whole person¹⁵. If a student lacks self-confidence, this comes out in the dancing as well and the student loses even more

¹³ "Body esteem was assessed by how participants rated their figure, waist, legs, buttocks, hips, and weight" (Van Zelst et al. 2004, 50).

¹⁴ Fitness esteem "was assessed by how participants rated their energy level, agility, and physical condition" (Van Zelst et al. 2004, 51).

¹⁵ An excerpt from the Loyola Marymount University mission statement: "Growth in knowledge and mastery of a discipline are only part of the total educational experience. As one alumnus has remarked, "I consider my time at LMU a rite of passage to adulthood when I grew intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually." This kind of integrated personal growth reflects what is traditionally understood by the education of the whole person" (Mission Statement of Loyola Marymount University).

confidence because she does not believe she is dancing at her best. (See figure below.)

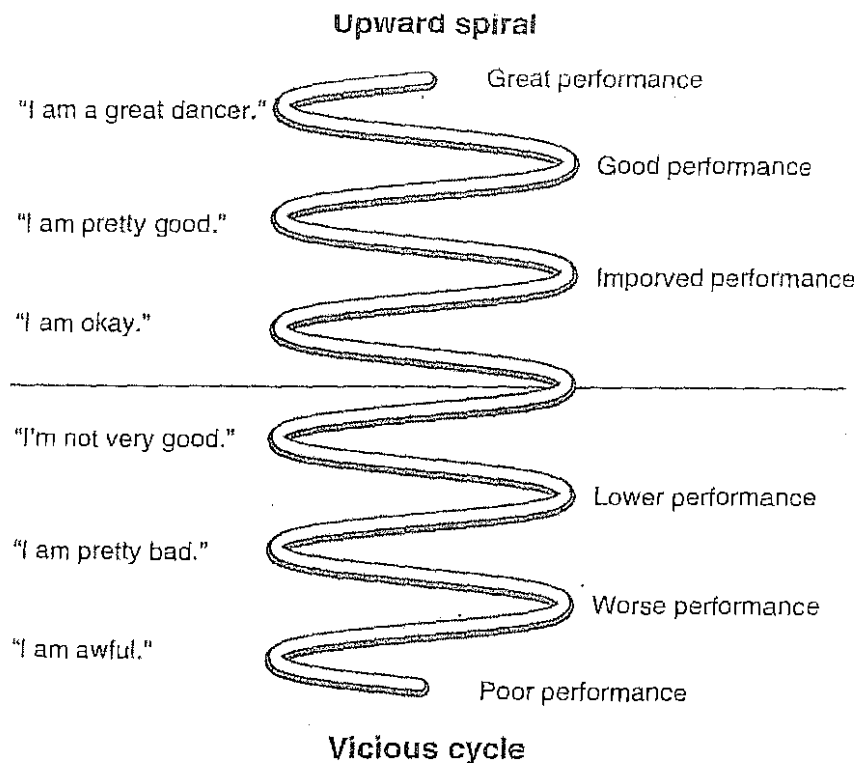


Figure 2.1 Upward spiral and vicious cycle.

(Taylor & Taylor 19).

A vicious cycle continues and ballet is no longer an enjoyable activity, but one that is used as a punishment to the body. Sadly, at SAB, “in almost every advanced class, there are one or two gifted dancers whose drawn faces and tight bodies reflect a handicapping drive towards some unreachable perfection” (Dunning 179). It is important to note that the perfectionism and drive is “handicapping”. Motivation is generally considered to be positive and helps to move people in new directions, but here drive is seen as counterproductive. The drive for the goal can be detrimental in the quest for the actual goal. This distraction is known in psychology as psychic disorder or “information

that conflicts with existing intentions, or distracts us from carrying them out” with the examples of “pain, fear, rage, anxiety, or jealousy. All of these varieties of disorder force attention to be diverted to undesirable objects, leaving us no longer free to use it according to our preferences” (Csikszentmihalyi *Flow* 36). Ballet students are not taught to channel inner energy productively or in a healthy manner.

Aalten notices that “During their education and professional training dancers develop an instrumental attitude towards their bodies....the body is a tool, an object that exists in part separately from herself” (268-269). Joseph Mazo, a journalist, made the observation that dancers

know their bodies as outside observers, not as integrated beings. Most humans have the misfortune to think of themselves as compartmentalized trinities—mind, body, and emotions. Few people can think, feel, and act spontaneously and all at once function as a complete organism. Their training makes dancers even more divided than most of us. Dancers are body-aware, but the majority subconsciously see their bodies as tools. They live in their bodies, not with them (1974: 106).

In conclusion, Balanchine ballet training is fundamentally flawed in that the focus is on training the physical body alone. This flaw leads to the problems of low self-confidence and many mind-body disorders. These problems are perpetuated by the lack of mental guidance in pre-professional and professional ballet training. This approach to training has the potential to lead to a frustrating cycle of burnout and discontent with the body, the self, and ballet itself. However, we also see that dance can be a very positive experience when viewed as a challenge with a reasonable degree of self-acceptance. Flow is the main reason that people dance and training should strive to place dancers in the flow experience as often as possible.

Yoga Therapy

Yoga originated in India and has taken many forms over the thousands of years that it has been practiced. Hatha yoga is the form that most Western nations associate with yoga. Hatha yoga was developed and popularized by Yogi Swatmarama in the fifteenth century who defined his practice of *asanas*¹⁶ as a “preparatory stage of physical purification that renders the body fit for the practice of higher meditation” (“Yoga” 2008). The body is the vessel of the mind and must be purified before meditation at a superior level can be practiced. In this definition, we can see that yoga uses the body to influence the mind, but also acknowledges that the mind influences the body. You cannot have one without the other. If we examine the etymology of the word, “Yoga means to yoke, or to join two things together” (“Hatha Yoga” 2008). Yoga joins the mind with the body. The specific form of Hatha yoga is “is meant to join together sun (masculine, active[, “ha”]) energy with moon (feminine, receptive[, “tha”]) energy, thus producing balance and greater power in an individual” (2008).

Yoga is part of a group of therapies called complementary alternative medicine (CAM). Other therapies in this group are diverse and varied, including, but not limited to, acupuncture, chiropractic, herbalism, Chinese and Tibetan traditional medicine, and therapeutic horseback riding (“Alternative Medicine” 2008). These therapies, while being labeled as alternative, and not recognized as real medicine by national institutions such as the American Medical Association, nevertheless may provide great benefit to patients who have tried Western-style medicine and have found no remedy for or relief from their

¹⁶ Yoga poses

conditions (“Alternative Medicine” 2008). For many patients, especially those with chronic pain, religious or personal beliefs which discourage use of drugs or doctors, and/or allergies or adverse side effects to treatment, turn to alternative medicine because they have no other path to follow. These patients most often do not care what the treatment is, so long as it works. As an alternative medicine, yoga has proven with time and anecdotal evidence, as well as an increasing amount of scientific research that it works.

Yoga has been around for thousands of years longer than ballet, yet we are still seeing yoga grow as a fad exercise program in the United States. Yoga is promoted as an exercise regiment that everyone can take part in. Yoga is advertised as healing, relaxing, stress relieving, tension releasing-the miracle motion that everyone can do, no matter body shape, weight or condition. A new field of yoga practice that has emerged in the United States is called yoga therapy. As described by yoga therapy pioneers Larry Payne and Richard Usatine, “Yoga therapy adapts the practices of Yoga to the needs of people with specific or persistent health problems” (14).

Yoga therapy during pre-professional ballet training will help to mentally prepare students for the transition between the lifestyle of a student and that of a professional performing career by integrating mind and body as well as decreasing the prevalence of mind-body disorders by raising confidence levels. Three components of yoga therapy that could be successful in offering a new approach to ballet training are breathing, relaxation, and Eastern philosophies.

Breathing is something that humans do naturally and also something we are generally unaware of. However, breath is unique in that it is the only autonomic system that each of us can consciously control. Yoga breathing includes several types (listed basic to complex): Focused breathing, belly breathing, belly-to-chest breathing, and chest-to-belly breathing to name a few. Breathing for each of the techniques described here occurs through the nose. If this is not possible, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth is also acceptable.

Focused breathing involves experiencing what the breath does to the body. The breath will make the chest rise and fall, the body expand and contract. The goal of focused breathing is to bring attention to the breath, to notice, but not to change. The breath is observed. During belly breathing, the attention is brought to the lower abdomen, or the belly. The focus is on expanding the belly during inhalation and contracting the belly during exhalation. Belly-to-chest breathing asks the belly to expand first, followed by the ribs, then the upper chest and collarbone. The exhale reverses the cycle, contracting the upper chest, ribs, and finally the stomach. Chest-to-belly breathing is the exact opposite of belly-to-chest breathing, as the inhale expands first at the chest and the exhale contracts first at the chest.

Bryan Kest, owner of the Power Yoga studios in Santa Monica, CA, teaches that “The breath is significant for at least a few reasons. Firstly [sic], it is happening right now. Therefore, when focused on the breathing, you become quiet, clear and present. Second, the breath usually mirrors the mind: when you are stressed/upset, the breath loses its calmness; when you are calm, the breath remains calm” (“Quality” 2009). A link

between mind and body can take place when we bring mental focus and control to the physical action of breathing. Mental awareness creates a cadence of breath and also delivers oxygen to the physical body and relaxes us. Focusing on the breath also forces us to concentrate on the here and now. Thoughts may come, but during the breathing exercises, we observe their presence, then let them go. This can bring about a calm, present focus and an increase in awareness of the movement happening in the body even at rest.

Relaxation is another important component of yoga practice. Relaxation should not be thought of as a state unto itself, but instead a place that is free of stress. The absence of stress in the inner space of the mind and in physical body tissue is the state of relaxation. Breathing can help to bring someone to this place. The student should focus on releasing tension through the mouth and nose. Relaxation enhances the connection between the mind and body because tense or stressed people can consciously relax muscles with the mind. Just as we fire muscles by using the mind, we also are able to relax them using the same mechanism. Many people often confuse relaxation with meditation and the difference is subtle, but still apparent. Relaxation involves releasing tension, usually in the physical body, for instant relief that does not last any longer than the relaxation period. As explained by Larry Payne, "Meditation is a deeper, more intense technique in which the meditator seeks not only to reach a deep state of relaxation but also to quiet the mind, and maintain a higher state of being beyond the time of meditation" (48-49).

Eastern philosophy is comprised of many ideas and beliefs such as newness, present focus, and self-acceptance. A principle of yoga is that every day we are new beings and that no two days are ever the same. This is a refreshing and healing mindset because one single bad day is just that, a single day. Instead of agonizing over a bad ballet class, a student is more able to look past it, to accept it, and to move on. This approach to ballet classes and to life can help to support a healthy mind-body balance. Yoga also teaches present focus. A focus on the past is associated with depression (Neswald 1). A focus on the future is associated with anxiety (1). Eating disorders are often coupled with these two emotional states either singly or together. A present focus means that a person can enjoy what they are doing in the moment and can stay concentrated on what's going on right here and right now. Life is a series of present moments, so if you miss the present, you are missing out on life. People who are able to maintain a present focus are more satisfied with their lives and report higher levels of happiness (1). Yoga emphasizes a present focus because it forces the individual to listen to the body and respond to its needs. Because humans are new beings every day, we constantly must reassess what our needs are for that present moment and embrace them.

Yoga practice also focuses on self-acceptance. Yoga teaches a student to push herself to her personal limit that day and no more, but also no less. Payne and Usatine assert that "Yoga is not a competition--not even with yourself. Yoga encourages you to move at your own pace and not judge yourself" (29). This principle of non-judgment is something that ballet students should know. Most ballet dancers judge themselves more critically than their teachers, whose criticism is already quite formidable. To assist a

student in withholding judgment, we must provide other methods of focus for the mind. Csikszentmihalyi describes the processing of an event as “appear[ing] in consciousness purely as information, without necessarily having a positive or negative value attached to it. It is the self that interprets the raw information in the context of its own interests and determines whether it is harmful or not” (*Flow* 38). Judging an event and giving it a negative label is an interpretation almost entirely independent of the event itself.

Kest’s experience and practice leads him to conclude that:

happiness is a state of mental balance. Not craving and clinging, but accepting who we are and where we are at, instead of rejecting where we are at in a constant pursuit to get somewhere....In yoga class and maybe in life, let the practice be, “I am not trying to get anywhere, I am trying to make it OK to be where I am at” because I love myself and value my process” (“About” 2009)!!

Kest observes that “What I’ve learned is that my greatest yoga teacher is within! The knowledge I’ve acquired is a direct result of me quieting my mind and being open enough to receive the teachings coming through” (2009). Yoga is about looking inside of ourselves and finding that our greatest wisdom comes from within. This is very empowering. All of the answers are inside ourselves, in our inner space, if only we knew how to look. The how is yoga. Kest claims that “I walk away from my practice feeling whole, complete, satisfied and full. I don’t believe any other person can give you that” (2009).

Balanchine believed that the inner space held great significance. Cultivating the inner needs of the mind is crucial for the performer. Also, knowledge of the inner space may prevent or help treat eating disorders. Payne and Usatine say that “The more attuned

you become to your body, the harder it becomes to treat yourself with disrespect” (7). They also assert that “with successive practice, you learn to recognize negative or destructive thoughts and consciously replace them with something more positive” (236). Yoga gives the student a way to identify destructive thoughts and the opportunity to change them before they are damaging. Eating disorders are as much mental as physical, and clearly demonstrate the powerful relationship between the body and the mind.

One study involving yoga and eating disorders looked at fifth grade girls and concluded that yoga practice and relaxation techniques significantly decreased the prevalence of eating disorders and had positive effects on body image and confidence compared to a control group that did not participate in a yoga program (Scime & Cook-Cottone). Yoga can decrease the chances of a ballet student developing an eating disorder and can enable a young girl to become more comfortable with herself and her physical limits.

One aspect of yoga that I have not yet mentioned is poses. Many people think of yoga as simply a series of poses which can be done for toning, exercise, and perhaps for relaxation. Contrary to this popular belief, yoga practice does not necessarily include poses. Several forms of yoga such as Bhakti (“loving devotion to a personal god”), Karma Yoga (“selfless service”), and Jnana Yoga (“cultivat[ing] higher wisdom as a path to the divine”) do not include poses at all (Payne & Usatine 5). I do not think that traditional yoga poses are required for ballet dancers. This is because breathing and relaxation techniques can be practiced by substituting ballet steps for yoga poses. Dancers already spend a considerable amount of time in complex poses during their

ballet practice and so the breathing, relaxation, and philosophies could better serve dancers if practiced without the *asanas*. It is not that yoga poses are unimportant, it is just that they can be variable. We can achieve similar states of mind by taking a yoga mindset and applying it to other forms of motion. Tai chi¹⁷, for example, brings about similar feelings of flow and peace to the mind, but the actions are quite different from yoga. This goes to show that although the physical motions may be different, the goal of relaxation and intimate mind-body connection stays the same. There are many paths to one goal.

¹⁷ A form of martial arts which emphasizes the mind-body connection.

Flow

Ballet and yoga are similar in that they both have the potential to be flow experiences. This shared quality means that both practices have the potential to link body and mind successfully. Flow has been described in layman's terms as "being in the zone" or "being on top of one's game". Csikszentmihalyi reports that "a broad range of activities rely on rhythmic or harmonious movement to generate flow. Among these dance is probably the oldest and the most significant..." (*Flow* 99).

Flow has been studied somewhat extensively in the context of traditional athletics, but my feeling is that dance is a sport as well as an art form and flow can be applied successfully to it as well. There is a great deal of research in the field of sport psychology which is quite relevant to ballet, yet since the arts lack the funding that is provided to sports, research on dance psychology is somewhat more limited. However, dancers should be able to benefit from athletic research as much as any other athlete. We can incorporate lessons learned through sports research into ballet training. Far from stopping at anatomical and biomechanical research, science has also delved into sport psychology to aid in developing the athletic mind. In his book, *Body Mind Mastery*, Dan Millman argues that the inner life of the athlete is often overlooked but just as important as the physical training. From this observation, the conclusion would be to train dancers to master the 'inner life' (inner space) as well as the physical body. He also suggests that it is "through training that we integrate the body, mind, and emotion" (Millman xv). This means that the inner space is capable of being developed and that the connection between mind and body is not necessarily inherent, but one that can be learned. Unfortunately, in

traditional ballet training, scientific information about the body or the mind is simply not provided to the student.

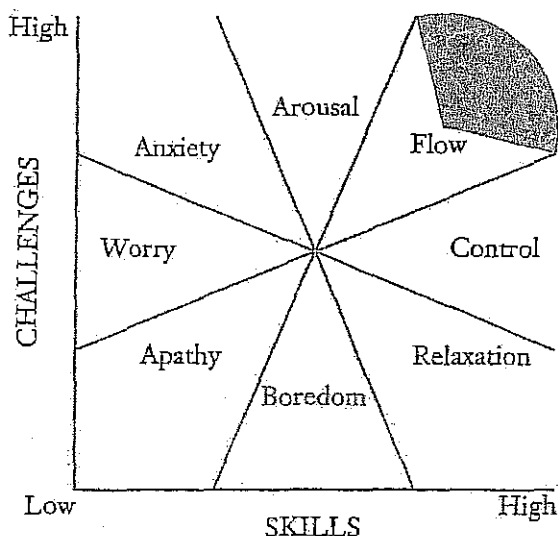
Another benefit of achieving the flow experience is that “those who attain it develop a stronger, more confident self, because more of their psychic energy has been invested successfully in goals they themselves have chosen” (*Flow* Csikszentmihalyi 40). If a student can attain a flow experience during ballet classes, a new cycle of confidence will occur. Each new flow experience will lead to more confidence, so each dance class will build confidence.

Flow occurs when an individual engages in an activity that is highly challenging but at which the individual is highly skilled. (See figure below).

THE CONTENT OF EXPERIENCE 31

Figure 1

The quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills. Optimal experience, or flow, occurs when both variables are high.



Sources: Adapted from Massimini & Carli 1988; Csikszentmihalyi 1990.

(Flow 31).

As we see in the chart, flow occurs in the upper right hand corner only with appropriate amounts of skill and challenge. A dancer who graduates from a pre-professional dance program will likely have highly challenging classes and be well-skilled at ballet from all of her previous years of training. The resulting combination should be a flow experience. However, this does not always occur. Because the mind and confidence has not been developed in early ballet training, a dancer may perceive that she has very difficult classes (high challenges) and is not a satisfactory dancer (low skills). As demonstrated by the diagram, this combination of high challenge and low skill results in worry or even anxiety. Worry and anxiety are key emotions connected with body disorders and low self-esteem. The goal of ballet training therefore should be to keep a student in the flow zone, keeping classes just as challenging but giving the student physical and emotional skills to deal with the challenges in a healthy and positive manner. Changing a student's perception is important because "the outside event appears in consciousness purely as information, without necessarily having a positive or negative value attached to it. It is the self that interprets the raw information in the context of its own interest and determines whether it is harmful or not" (38). If we can change a student's perception of the situation and validate the quality of her skills, we are more likely to find her in the flow zone.

The skills which are necessary for flow to occur have been described as:

1. *Concentration*: the act or process of directing one's attention to a single object;
2. *Composure*: a calmness of mind, body, bearing, and appearance; and

3. *Confidence*: state of mind or consciousness marked by certainty of one's abilities and ease and freedom from doubt (Gordin & Reardon 225).

These skills are very clearly present in dancers that have been successful.

Concentration allows for technical execution and blocking out of unnecessary stimuli. Composure is shown in the efficiency of movement; each step only contains as much energy as it requires. There is a sense of total control, of regality. Confidence is shown when professional dancers make their movements look simple and easy, when in reality they are the opposite.

Traditional ballet training and discipline includes the teaching of concentration. Pre-professional dance students are usually serious about their work and strive towards their goals. Concentration on a goal is so well taught that one observer of SAB is surprised because "the autocratic single-mindedness of an American institution...is comparable to the state ballet academies of...the Soviet Union" (Dunning 204). To develop composure and confidence however, we should integrate principles of yoga into the autocratic ballet classroom.

Csikszentmihalyi notes that "the similarities between Yoga and flow are extremely strong; in fact it makes sense to think of Yoga as a very thoroughly planned flow activity. Both try to achieve a joyous, self-forgetful involvement through concentration, which in turn is made possible by a discipline of the body" (*Flow* 105). In this way, mind and body are linked and cannot be separated from each other. Mental strength results in physical strength, and vice versa. The result is an anabolic cycle, building confidence and improving performance. Flow is essential to dance because it is

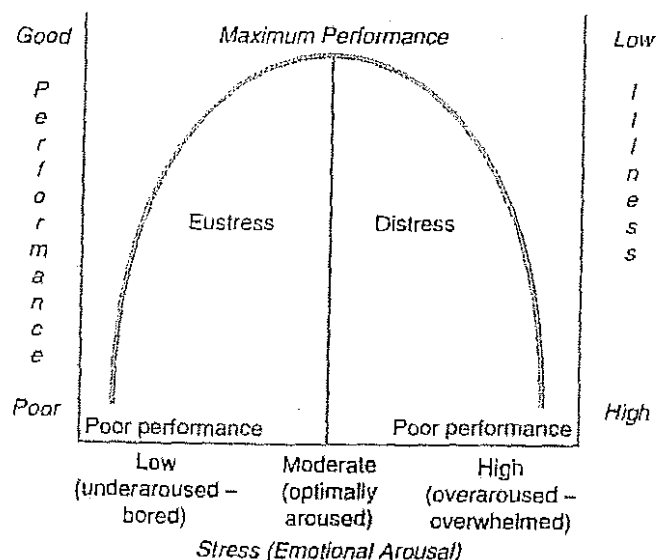
the reason that dancers dance—"In answer to my question why they danced, they would say something like: 'I do it for the moment when it all comes together'" (Aalten 273). I do it for the flow experience.

Creating a new tradition

Yoga practice creates feelings of calm and composure which are the opposite of emotions that competitive pre-professional dance training elicits. (See figure below).

The Yerkes-Dodson curve illustrates that, to a point, stress or arousal can actually increase performance. Stress to the left of the midpoint is considered to be eustress. Stress beyond the midpoint, however, is believed to detract from performance and/or health status and is therefore labeled distress.

Figure 1.3



(Seward 19).

Based upon measured stress responses, an individual performs best when stress is optimal (19). As we can see from the chart, some stress is beneficial, but after a certain point it becomes a handicap and negatively affects physical performance. Traditional ballet training puts a student into the unhealthy range of stresses and yoga can help bring stress levels back down to an optimal level for the highest performance outcome.

Yoga enhances the performance quality in dancers. Flow experiences, like yoga, create "a person who is in control of consciousness", having "the ability to focus at will, to be oblivious to distractions, and to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal,

and not longer” (*Flow* Csikszentmihalyi 31). Concentrating until a goal is achieved is important because a student can focus intensely for a period of time but then release the concentration at the end of the class time. Concentration and seriousness are valuable qualities to have in a student, but they need to be applied at the appropriate times—during class, but not necessarily before and after. The student learns to control attention and can focus intensely during a ballet class, but when that class is over, she can relax and joke around and not have to worry about her earlier performance. This may help to relieve performance anxiety as well. A dancer can focus on the performance or audition, but before and after, she does not have to stress about it. Ballet dancers need to learn the skills to live in the present and not to remain in the past or be stuck on the future.

For ballet teachers to be prepared to teach using this new approach, they should have training sessions in yoga therapy and be well versed in the types of breathing and relaxation exercises. They may have some knowledge of yoga poses, but this is not necessary. Most importantly, this new breed of ballet teacher must understand that the current system is flawed and there is a need for change. From mind-body disorders, to lack of confidence, and a high rate of burnout, it is clear that ballet students are crying out for a change in the system. Teaching this new method will be useless without the proper intention, which is to use ballet as a healing tool as well as being the celebrated art form that it is. There are many teachers from Balanchine’s generation that insist there is nothing wrong with “weeding out” students that cannot stand the rigors of their program. I would agree that separating the promising students with potential ballet careers is something that must be done eventually, but ballet schools offer an all-or-nothing policy.

Students with low potential as successful professional dancers languish in the cycle of violence against the self, and even students with potential wonder if they will ever be “good enough”. The students need to learn that they are already good enough, and that they must trust in their training that they know what is right inherently, because the technique has been so ingrained in their bodies. Ballet should build confidence, not break it down. Ballet has the potential to be just as healing as yoga is. Ballet is a practice just like yoga. The poses are simply expressed in a different form.

A ballet class in this new technique will begin with *shavasana*¹⁸. A teacher will lead the students from the front, talking them through the exercise. Students will arrange themselves around the room and lay down with their backs on the floor. It may be appropriate to allow extra warm-ups to be worn for this portion of the class so that a student is not distracted because she is cold. The position should be comfortable, with arms and legs extended, palms facing the ceiling (anatomical position). Having the eyes closed is very important so that a student does not get distracted by others or feel self-conscious about the exercise. The student will be told to begin by observing the breath. Not changing, but just observing. After a few moments, the teacher will instruct that the student should transition to belly breathing, then after a few breaths full body breathing. During the breathing, the teacher will tell the student to focus on the inner space, to quiet the mind, and bring the focus inside the skin. The student will observe the inner space, but not try to change anything. Stray thoughts are to be observed, and then let go. The student will not dwell on any one thing. After about five minutes of this breathing

¹⁸ Corpse pose. The student lies on her back with arms by her sides, palms facing up.

exercise, the teacher will give the instruction to breathe out, hard, and use the breath to release any stresses that she feels, either physical, mental, or emotional. About three breaths should be exhaled in this fashion.

The teacher will guide the student along a journey of relaxation from the toes to the head. First, the student will be told to relax the foot and toes. Then relax the calf and feel the muscle come away from the bone. Thigh muscles should release tension, as well as the buttocks. The stomach will become soft. Observe how the breath changes the shape of the body. The stomach goes in and out. The ribs expand and contract without effort. Release any tension in the shoulders, the arms, the hands. Release tension in the neck and scalp. Smooth out the lines of the forehead, relax behind the ears and between the eyebrows. Relax the tongue at the root and at the tip. Feel the jaw and throat release. The skin should hang from the bones. The student will then remain for a minute or two, observing the absence of stress and the state of relaxation.

The teacher will continue: feel the ground beneath the body. It is supportive and stable. Feel how each part of your body touches the ground and how firm it is. The ground contains infinite amounts of energy and can absorb infinite amounts of energy. Inhale, and feel the energy coming up out of the ground into your body. Exhale and release any of your own negative energy into the ground. Inhale and take what you need. Exhale and release what is dragging you down. Take one more inhale and, dragging the arms on the ground, circle them overhead so the fingers reach as far from the head as possible. Internally rotate the thighs until the legs are in parallel and flex the feet. Feel the stretch from fingers to toes and the energy flowing between them inside the body. Exhale

and roll onto the side into a fetal position. Take a few breaths here and get up when you are ready. *Barre* will now begin.

A traditional *barre* is now appropriate at this point. The teacher should remind the student to breathe with the music and to feel the music as an extension of the breath. Eyes should be closed for the *pliés*. This will allow connection with the inner space that was observed on the floor. *Porte de bras*¹⁹ should reflect the breath. The breath should initiate the movement. Movement originates at the core and emanates outward rather than from the limbs inward. Arm will go *en bas*²⁰ to first position, then flow from first to second through the *en bas* position. The exhale should be the *plié* and the inhale should be the straightening of the knees. Both the left and the right side should be conducted in this way. After this, the *barre* is conducted as usual, but musicality and breath are more integrated into the movements and highly encouraged verbally by the teacher.

Corrections during ballet class must be technical, but there can also be some philosophical points added for increased awareness of the state of the mind. Teachers can remind a student that each day is different, that what worked for them yesterday may not work today, and challenge them to find new approaches to the movements.

This approach is more viable than traditional training because there is balance. Balance between yoga, originating in the East and ballet in the West, balance between mind and body, balance between scientific research and traditional Eastern spirituality. Things in balance last longer, are stronger, and are more resilient when exposed to

¹⁹ Movement of the arms.

²⁰ Arm position where both arms are low, creating an oval shape. The fingers are curved in and almost touching, with the elbows rotated outward.

complex situations. We would not train the body to be strong on one side and weak on the other. Traditional ballet training teaches us to train the body in a balanced way. It should also teach us to balance the mind-body relationship.

Another reason this approach is more valuable than the traditional is that it prevents problems of self-confidence, breath, and composure before the student has a chance to develop low self-esteem, holds the breath, or is anxious and jittery. It is always more difficult to unlearn bad habits than it is to develop good ones from the beginning. This approach is possible to teach to students who have been involved in ballet for many years, but it would be most effective when started with young students and progresses with their skill level. Once ballet students reach an advanced level, it is difficult to teach them new ways of thinking because they have so many preconceived notions about how ballet "should be". Children are clean slates and soak up new knowledge, so it is beneficial to teach them a variety of approaches. Multidisciplinary studies at a young age, such as combining ballet and yoga, means that they will be more open and adaptable to new situations.

I would recommend the previously described approach to be taught to students who are just going *en pointe*²¹, at ages 12 and 13 and continuing on through their subsequent training. Earlier than this age, children are not able to focus their mental energies in the same way. When ballet students begin their *pointe* work, this represents a new stage in their quest to be a professional ballerina. They are more serious, and the competition becomes more pronounced. For those younger dancers, in an effort to

²¹ Using special hard shoes to dance on the tips of the toes. This type of training occurs after ages 12 or 13 to ensure that the feet are developed enough to withstand the weight of the entire body.

prepare them for the yoga therapy-ballet combination class, I would suggest the following protocol.

After conducting class as usual and before the *reverence*²², have all the students stand at the center floor and close their eyes. Starting at about 30 seconds and increasing the length of time as the age of the student increases, concentrate on hearing and feeling the breath. No fidgeting, no moving around, just listening to our breathing. By starting with this exercise, students will be more trained in listening to the breath when they first begin *shavasana*.

For ballet dancers that grew up in pre-professional schools, like I did, this approach provides a healing, therapeutic way to continue dancing without facing the same levels of criticism, low self-confidence, and doubt that plagued our earlier training. We have to let go of what we think ballet is and allow the mind as well as the body to be flexible. We can use yoga therapy as a way to love ballet again and to become immersed in our own flow experience, which is the reason most of us started dancing in the first place.

²² A curtsy or porte de bras at the end of a class or a performance.

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