

**Performing the Self:
An Insight into the Formation of Self as Dancer**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research.

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Abstract

The relationship between mind, body and self is a contentious issue that has concerned both ancient and modern philosophers. Recently, new research has emerged based on Zen Buddhism and the Husserlian based phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and focusing on the concept of *Leib*; of a lived body and embodied self, existing in specific biological and social conditions. Through the aesthetics of dance, I will explore how the social body techniques of our specific life-worlds and the conditions of our physical world shape our perception of mind-body unity. In this way, being cannot be understood as a state we arrive at through self-cultivation, but rather a process through which we use self-cultivation techniques to negotiate to be recognised as functional, social beings. The self is therefore not a static entity but one that is performed over again in a process that creates space for both physical, social and intellectual growth.

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While people live the life
they are open to the restless skies, and streams flow in and out
darkly from the fecund cosmos, from the angry red sun, from the moon
up from the bounding earth, strange pregnant streams, in and out of the flesh,
and man is an iridescent fountain, rising up to flower
for a moment godly, like Baal or Krishna, or Adonis or Balder, or Lucifer.

But when people are only self-conscious and self-willed
they cannot die, their corpus still runs on,
while nothing comes from the open heaven, from earth, from the sun and moon
to them, nothing, nothing;
only the mechanical power of self-directed energy
drives them on and on, like machines,
on and on, with the triumphant sense of power, like machines,
on and on, and their triumph in mere motion
full of friction, full of grinding, full of danger to the gentle passengers of growing life,
but on and on, on and on, till the friction wears them out
and the machine begins to wobble
and with hideous shrieks of steely rage and frustration
the worn-out machine at last breaks down:
it is finished, its race is over.

D.H. Lawrence

Preface

Who am I?

Where do I come from?

Where am I going?

As I reflect on the past and look towards the future, it seems to me that these three have been among the most enduring questions of human history. Debates on the definition of self often begin with the question: “What is the self?” Is the self (i.e. who we are) the physical person, an identity predetermined by my genetic makeup, or was Descartes correct in saying: “I think therefore I am”?

Trying to elucidate the genesis, the nature and the meaning of self is not anything new. Philosophers, from Plato to contemporary academics, have written volumes about the self but they have yet to discover a finite, all-encompassing definition. This is due largely to the complex nature of the self, which does not lend itself easily to categorisation. Coupled with the increasingly diverse social, personal and cultural relationships encountered today, it should not be surprising that the self, more often than not, escapes concise delineation.

I used to think it bizarre that people needed to “find themselves”. I mean, where could one possibly go to when one is constantly in the presence of one’s self? However I have come to realise now that one’s life journey can, in many ways, be considered the search for or discovery of one’s self. Moreover, it is quite easy to be “absent” or “disconnected” from or “unconscious” of one’s self. More often than not, this is the normality of our existence. A state of stupor, if you will, from which (to use a concept found in Zen philosophy) we seek to awaken ourselves and thus attain

enlightenment or, at least, the realisation of who we are and the process through which we come to be.

It is therefore naïve to assume that *I* am a simple entity. Who I am, who I think I am and who others think I am make *I* a complex, politicised and (more importantly) contextualised (i.e. non-discrete) entity, engaged in both the physical and social complexities of living in this world. In searching for one's self, one discovers that there are many selves or identities that an individual assumes over the course of his/her life. Moreover, these selves or identities are that which facilitate one's belonging (or otherwise) to a particular community. However, none of these identities are discrete and they often overlap into each other and change accordingly to suit different times, places and occasions, creating a sense of confusion for those seeking discrete, enduring identities. This is even more confusing when you take into account that one's sense of self, both physical and cultural, can extend beyond our individual corporeal boundaries to incorporate our external physical and cultural environment.

In a survey conducted by Johannes Han-Yin Chang (Lau, 2000), it was discovered that twelve percent of young Chinese Singaporeans would prefer to be either Caucasian or Japanese. News of the then unpublished survey¹ soon featured in every major paper in Singapore and raised a furore in the Chinese community in Singapore; the older generation, in particular, lamenting the younger generation's lack of knowledge about their roots and culture and, consequently, their alienation from their ethnic identity. This debate is hardly new to Chinese communities or other diasporic groups around the world. It is an urgent contemporary dilemma in the aftermath of the construction of national identities in the nineteenth century, their

¹ As many, including Professor Chang, have pointed out, this statistic was simply the result of one of a series of questions asked, and looking at it in isolation from the other questions may therefore put a biased slant on the results. Having not actually seen the full results of his research, I am not commenting on its merits, but on the public reaction to the particular statistic cited above.

subsequent disintegration in the twentieth century and reinvigoration in the twenty first century. In a global community where a Singaporean who has never been to Japan can enjoy Japanese pop culture, an Australian with no ties to Mexico has sampled Mexican food and an American who has never left his/her hometown can see what is happening in Cambodia; individuals and communities find themselves having to grapple with the definition of both their personal and collective identities.

The migration and spread of the Chinese people from the “motherland” of mainland China has given rise to a kind of social distinction that rates the level of one’s “Chinese-ness”. Geographic location, proficiency in the language and the depth of one’s cultural knowledge appear to be the standards by which one’s “Chinese-ness” is gauged today. Against such standards, I measure up poorly indeed with a score of one out of three. And yet I think of myself as Chinese and do not pretend to be otherwise. I daresay, moreover, that most people would also think the same.

In addressing the issue of self and identity, there are several questions that must be asked. To begin with, am I Chinese by virtue of my physical appearance and/or geographical situation and/or my cultural behaviours/knowledge? Is my non-identification with “traditional Chinese” culture and identity a sign of my alienation from my Chinese identity or an attempt to re-inscribe, to re-create a new “Chinese” identity that is relevant to the place and time I live in? And, ultimately, one must ask also if this notion of Chinese-ness (or any other identity) is or must be a fixed, universal truth or standard or is it one that can (or must) evolve over time?

It is ironic to note that although one of Singapore’s most internationally acclaimed artists, Goh Choo San, was a dancer and choreographer trained in a “Western” dance form, and that although several Asian countries (Singapore included) support a local ballet company, classical ballet is still regarded in some

quarters as a foreign art form. It would appear then that the practice of an art form within their community does not necessarily preclude the art form's inclusion as a facet of that community's collective identity. And yet, for the individual artist, their identity as artist might have as significant and intimate a place as their cultural, national or ethnic identity in their perception of who they are. This would suggest that one's identity is "patched" together to form a complete piece, from the varied experiences of one's life. I feel that this is certainly an apt description of my experience, as I am both unable and unwilling to say that this part of me is Singaporean, that part is the dancer and yet another is the academic.

In this thesis, I shall look at the performing arts, specifically dance, to find my answers to these questions on individual and collective identities. I choose the performing arts to examine how we define and become who we are as its practice involves behaviour that is generally taught and learned in a conscious and systematic manner (as opposed to everyday life habits which are intuitively learned, although facets of both the arts and everyday life do cross over) and imbued with both social and personal significance. Dance, specifically, is also often regarded as a fundamental aspect of human culture. Its presence and (less often) its absence is an indication of the social, moral and cultural values of a community, particularly in regard to the body. And while pure dance (if there can be such a thing) has little regard for one's nationality or ethnicity, its practice (i.e. the act of dancing) is an embodiment of social and cultural significance².

For yet another aspect of dance, which lends itself to this study, is that dance cannot exist in isolation. Unlike arts such as painting and writing, dance does not have a separate existence from the dancer. Although we have managed to record dance

² For instance, what is the social and cultural significance of an Indian man who practices traditional Japanese dancing and a Japanese man who regularly indulges in line dancing?

with words and symbols(i.e. dance notation), these recordings are different to what we commonly recognise as dance³. As such, dance has an intimate connection with the body, that is, our corporeal and tangible perception of our self. At the same time, it challenges pre-existing notions of the physical self by pushing the corporeal form beyond previously known limits to explore new means of behaviour and expression.

When we examine dance as a performance of self, we see also that the performance of dance consists of different variables which contribute to our definition of the self as a dancer. These participating variables (consisting at different times of dancers, musicians, singers and the audience) must come to an agreement for a performance to be recognised as dance (Martlew, 2000). This suggests a need for complicity between performers and their audience and the influence of social and physical locality to facilitate the understanding of a collective sense of identity.

I have been taking dance lessons since I was about five years old. Despite being part of a Chinese family in Singapore⁴, my mother signed me up for ballet lessons, mainly because the prolific number of schools made such classes the most readily accessible form of dance. I only stopped dancing at eighteen as most of my peers had given up dancing years ago and I was starting to feel a little too old to still be maintaining a kind of existence as an amateur ballerina or a dance student. On coming to Australia however, I discovered a small but enthusiastic community of amateur adult ballet dancers and soon joined one of these groups. A few years later, after watching a friend perform some Spanish dances, I decided that this was something I might enjoy and enrolled in some Spanish dance classes as well.

³ Whenever I choreograph a dance, it is never complete until I teach it to someone and see it actually performed. From there, changes are often made to suit the dancer/s involved. In this sense, each dance is always evolving with every performance.

⁴ Or perhaps because I grew up in a Chinese family in Singapore and learning ballet was a kind of status symbol at the time.

Despite having crossed a few cultural boundaries in my attempts at creating a place in the dance community through my performances of self as dancer (and later as dance teacher), I never thought too much about the cultural aspect of dance. For me dance has always been about the act itself; the skill, the style and the technique one learns and assimilates to become proficient in the art. Even when learning Spanish dance, the primary revelation that came from the experience was the re-discovery of the learning process through which one is formed and ultimately evolves as an individual. It was not until I made a scholarship application for this thesis to an arts foundation in Singapore, and was told that the thesis lacked an Asian or Singaporean content, that I began to think about the cultural context of dance and the identity one assumes through the performance of dance.

Although dance, drama and the arts in general are sometimes perceived as a pretend world, a world that mimics the “real” one, it is, for the performer, as real as our “regular”, everyday life-world. In fact, the principles and discipline of the arts can and do form a real presence in the development of the artist, not just as an artist, but as a *being-in-the-world*. The principles and discipline function as a reference point from which we develop notions, not only of our selves, but of the world around us as well. Moreover, such notions become acted upon as we physically and culturally shape our selves and our perceptions of others and of the world around us through our art.

For instance, when people first discover that I dance, they immediately assume that I must be extremely well co-ordinated and graceful without having watched me dance at all. Conversely, my training as a dancer has facilitated the development of my physical co-ordination, musicality and sense of balance, lending an air of the expected “grace” of a dancer. As such, the perceptions and realities we develop of

ourselves and those that people develop of us are clearly not limited to our performances of “everyday” life. Indeed, the identities we assume as dancer, actor or performer both on and off stage do have considerable bearing in our everyday life-world.

It is through this experience of how I perceive and perform myself, and how others perceive and respond to my performances, that I intend to develop a theory of a self that is *performed*. That is, a self that must be acted out from moment to moment (much like dancing) in order to have a sustained existence, a kind of active self-affirmation. Moreover, I want to show how performances of dance do have (amongst others) a cultural context and can be mobilised in the articulation not only of individual but of collective identities as well.

Bourdieu (1977) notes that individual experiences of communal practices are both the “structuring structure” and “structured structure” in the development and expression of our identities. Self-cultivation techniques (i.e. the means and methods through which we consciously train and develop a certain bearing or behaviour) provide, therefore, both the language for communication (structured structure) and the means for shaping the meaning of our “speeches” (structuring structure). In a communal, social context, the principles and techniques of self-cultivation set guidelines from which we learn, not only how to perform our selves, but also to moderate these performances in order to gain the acceptance or the rejection of the community.

As a dance teacher I have come across children who live up to their physical potential; children who are physically restricted but manage to do well⁵ nonetheless;

⁵By “doing well” I refer to a socially recognised understanding of what it means to “do well” in a dance form in terms of their ability to execute technique, choreography and expression. While this may vary with different dance forms, I apply my understanding of doing well in dance as I have experienced it in ballet and flamenco.

and (most perplexing) children with physical potential who are unable to progress beyond the minimum accoutrement of the technique. Clearly, for these children, having the “ideal” body is no guarantee of one’s success as a dancer. As a result, I often wonder how much effect the body we are born with and the environment (physical and social) we develop in have on whom we are. While there is freedom in the choices we make, is this freedom limited by the various physical and cultural circumstances that surround us? And if so, to what extent is it limited?

In some ways, my sister and I exemplify this conundrum of how the self is formed. We were both given the same opportunities as children and while we share some common traits, there are also ways in which we are hopelessly different. I can dance in high heeled shoes whereas it is not uncommon for her to trip over herself walking in bare feet. Thus, the exact mechanics and probabilities in the formation of our identity may always remain unfathomable to us. While self-cultivation techniques work to manipulate and aid in the formation of certain identity traits, they are not guarantees of a successful delivery. Much is still left to the individual being and the fickle nature of chance.

The same can also be said of the formation of collective, social identities in that it is often difficult to say with certainty why one group may choose one path, one means of expression, and not another. While some communities seek to retain the purity of their identity⁶, there are others who welcome change and happily incorporate new ideas into their existing practices. More often than not, the change and evolution of a society may come in a gradual process that its participants are not wholly aware of in the moment and only realise it on later reflection. It may also occur during a period of intense social revolution (as was the case when Russia and China became

⁶ And even in trying to maintain the purity of an identity, we change it.

communist countries) when vast changes happen at a greater pace. While the process of self-formation may never truly become transparent to us, it is nonetheless important to understand as much of this process as possible. This is vital to the enlightened growth of a community; and also to understanding the construction of communal (in particular national) identities, their significance and how these relate to the individual.

My hope is that this thesis will help uncover and explain the complexities in the formation of the individual and collective selves. As an inter-cultural and interdisciplinary project that seeks to draw connections between concepts of self and self-formation found in Eastern and Western philosophy, performance studies and cross-cultural studies, I must state that this is an eclectic project that “borrows” much from these diverse bodies of research and thought and makes no pretence of their being one and the same. I also do not pretend that a project like this can provide a substantial or authoritative analysis of these bodies of knowledge. Nor is it meant to construct a unified and coherent system of thought or develop into a school of philosophy or make definitive statements about dance.⁷ Instead, it selects varied philosophical “tools” from the box (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977) that serve different purposes in “getting the job done”⁸. In other words, this thesis takes a pragmatic approach to making sense of things.

Such bricolage is not a new approach and it certainly seems appropriate in a project that attempts to rethink the self by applying both Eastern and Western philosophies, understanding that these categories themselves are merely useful

⁷Since I will be referring to my personal experience of dance, which is grounded in ballet and Spanish dance.

⁸ Massumi notes that Deleuze “calls his kind of philosophy ‘pragmatics’ because its goal is the invention of concepts that do not add up to a system of belief or an architecture of propositions that you either enter or you don’t, but instead pack a potential in the way a crowbar in a willing hand envelops an energy of prying” (1992: 8).

fictions. What it does allow is the reinterpretation of existing ideologies through appropriation and application, creating space to think differently about familiar issues. Why this seemingly random and ad hoc approach? As a lesson learnt from life experience, this apparent madness in my methodology is a means of expression that mobilises the knowledge I have gained over my lifetime, much like the way the self develops. As Moustakas observes, “the most significant understandings that I have come to I have not achieved from books or from others, but initially, at least, from my own perceptions, observations and intuitions” (1994:41). By piecing together an assortment of theories (all of which support the common theme of a body-centred concept of self), I hope to piece together a theoretical expression that I feel can appropriately articulate the similarly random and ad hoc development of the self. Through this process of appropriation and adaptation, I believe that I will begin to shed a different light on the concept of self and to elucidate the process of becoming self that we call learning. There are those who would view this as a uniquely post-modern exploration of self, and perhaps it is. I would add, however, that it is the post-modern world, with its increasingly globalised perspective, that has empowered us to speak of the crazy quilt of identity, the “schizophrenic” entity I call “me” and the often contradictory experience of self in the world.

The first chapter of this thesis will explore existing concepts of self and try to establish a theory of self based on the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In this chapter I aim to establish the ground for an embodied sense of self in a lived rather than objective world and demonstrate how this is a more legitimate way of thinking about how we think about ourselves. To achieve this end, I will relate anecdotes from my own lived experiences as a means of illustrating various points. This anecdotal recollection puts into practice the theoretical argument about

the phenomenal process: that it is through experience that we learn and consequently are able to develop philosophies of the self.

It does not, however, come without some of the inherent problems of phenomenological analysis; the most important being that (and I will be arguing this point further into the thesis) try as we might, we can never really capture, record or accurately relate the lived experience. We may be able to give a good facsimile of it, but this copy becomes in itself another lived experience, related to and yet different and distinct from the moment we hoped to capture. This phenomenon is the major problem that faces anyone attempting a phenomenological analysis. Capturing the “real” essence of the event is impossible outside the moment of the situation. The best we can manage is a simulation. Even the phenomenological tools of *reduction* and *bracketing* do not do justice to the moment as they necessitate the removal of the object from its context. Moreover, this problem of description, of capturing the “essence” of a thing, is also an issue that plagues our articulation of self. Because identity is always fluctuating, the moment of self-realisation often passes even as it begins. As such, our attempts at capturing and fixing identity (in an effort to re-live our realisation) are contentious projects whose “truths” must be called into question.

The second chapter will use Buddhist philosophies of meditation and self-cultivation to examine the ever-continuing process of becoming. Buddhist philosophies focus on mind-body techniques as a means of explaining how we become the selves we are, which is something that phenomenology does not delve into very much. The significance of this chapter will become more evident as the thesis progresses to examine the interaction between the self and the environment. Suffice to say for now though, that if we were truly a self in the lived world, it is important to look into how this self comes to be and why it becomes what it becomes.

The second chapter therefore lays the groundwork for the exploration of the cross-pollination of culture and communities and the resulting impact on the formation of individual and collective identities. The techniques of self-cultivation (such as learning an art form or a specific social behaviour) while priming us for social life, are also a means through which we can express our individuality (or vice versa). Like-minded individuals may come together to create a community with a collective identity or an individual may choose to stand out from an existing community by acting in a manner contrary to the collective identity in order to acknowledge a different set of values. In time, a gathering of like-minded individuals can evolve into a community or collective identity of its own, with its own definition of aesthetics and belonging. The exact process may not always be as simple as I have described it and, certainly, the people who are grouped in a community may not recognise themselves as such but the social tendency towards categorisation does often result in the creation of such (imagined or otherwise) communities.

In the third chapter, I will draw together what phenomenology and Buddhism have to say about what the self is in order to understand how the self becomes. In this chapter I will explore how individual identities are developed through self-cultivation practices. To this end, I will focus on Sōtō Zen Buddhism's premise of conscious, daily practice in order to attain the transcendent self⁹. I shall also explore both Eastern and Western notions of neural pathways and ki energy in order to situate this self in the lived world of physical and social rules and boundaries. I will argue that the self is not a discrete and entity and its formation is therefore affected by absences and presences in its surrounding social and physical environment. How the self is

⁹ The transcendent self, as I will explain in the chapter, becomes a sense of being that simply is in that moment and is not always striving to be something else. This is based on the idea that as long as we are always striving to be something else in (perhaps) another time or place, we never truly are in the sense of a unified body-mind self.

communicated to its “audiences” is therefore shaped and governed (for part of the process of socialisation – learning to be part of a social community – involves abiding by the spoken or unspoken rules of that society) by the way in which the tangible and intangible aspects of self are presented.

The final chapter of this thesis examines the manner in which communities develop a sense of collective identity. In examining how different communities define, affect and change other communities, we begin to see that understanding the process of self-formation is something that tends to come with hind sight and that the formation of collective identities is, for the most part, not a self conscious exercise but possibly an exercise in being. In dance, such effects are evident in the emergence of various trends and fetishes at different times and places, as well as in the different meaning the performance of dance assumes at different points in time for individuals and for their community. This will be explored by tracing the development and emergence of Spanish dance, particularly the evolution of a Spanish “national” dance in the last century and the phenomena of the increasing interest in flamenco in Asia. Through this examination we shall see that such changes occur on a personal level as well as a larger, social level. This is especially important because I am arguing that our selves are also socially constructed, and therefore inextricably linked to who we are at the communal level.

Cross-cultural exchange has the potential to change the world; how we live in it; and how we perceive it. It already has many times over in the past and it will continue to do so. Why is understanding this important? By attaining a greater understanding of the process, we come closer to understanding the evolution of our socio-cultural life. Through this understanding, we are also able to change our learning processes in order to address the need to educate a body-mind, lived self that

is fluid, always changing and dwells in a liminal state of becoming. In accepting and developing an understanding of learning (and educating) based on an ambiguous self, we also seek to avoid the kind of polarity that tends to result in extremes rather than balance, thus bringing us closer to fulfilling our potential for enlightened activity in the world.

What is the Self?

Am I body or am I mind? Is it nature or nurture that determines who I am and will become? My sister and I often joke that we are becoming more like our mother (and consequently like each other) as we grow older. But is this because we are her genetic offspring or is it due to the way in which we have been raised? And while my sister and I share similarities in habit, we also exhibit characteristics that are often the polar opposite of the other. How can we account for these differences and similarities? What roles do nature and nurture have in the way we form our identities? Consider this: If “I” was purely a physical entity, would not the concept of self-cultivation be little more than wishful thinking (something the “sow’s ear into a silk purse” variety of “common sense” philosophy may attest to)? Conversely, if “I” was a corporeal entity that can be shaped and moulded by the mind and external forces, my legs would probably be a couple of inches longer and leaner right now.

Philosophies dealing with the concept of the self and its role in the world date far back into human history. That we still pursue the same question of self today is an indication of its complexity, mutability and elusiveness. It also points to the inadequacy with which traditional philosophies define the self. As the old standards by which we have traditionally defined ourselves fall by the wayside in the globalised, post-modern world, it has become increasingly important to find a new paradigm with which we can articulate and understand who we are. To arrive at this paradigm, however, we must first address a fundamental issue in the debate, which is the way we define the “real” state or existence of things. While our exploration of this concept will take into account Eastern philosophies of the self (in particular, Zen Buddhism),

we will position ourselves through our examination of the Western philosophy of phenomenology as a foundation from which to work.

Empiricist and transcendental movements in Western philosophy

In this chapter, we begin by exploring some of the philosophies that have influenced the way we think about the self. Beginning with the contrasting empiricist and transcendentalist movements that have played such an important role in shaping modern, Western philosophy, we are introduced to some of the issues (in particular the mind versus body conundrum in debates on the self) that have arisen as a result of both approaches. In an attempt to address some of these issues, we look to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of a lived, phenomenological self; an embodied or lived self that negotiates between the extremes of empiricism and transcendentalism.

The embodied self of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a discrete entity which is at the same time manifestly connected with the world in which it lives. While this entity comes with some predetermined qualities, it also learns from, develops through and is affected by the environment it lives in. This environment is both a physical and an ideological one and accounts for the scope and variety of human responses to any given situation - the grounds for self-cultivation. In this way the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty tries to create a theory of self that is based on our real¹⁰ experience of being a self in the world, which is quite different from the approaches taken by both empiricism and transcendentalism.

If we examine empiricism and transcendentalism, two broad philosophical movements that have had much influence on the way we see ourselves and the world

¹⁰The "real experience" here refers to the experience of self as we perceive it, which is culturally, historically and situationally specific.

around us, we see that each views and defines the world quite differently from the other¹¹. Briefly and simply stated, empiricism is generally represented by post-enlightenment scientific research and theory. Such findings posit the independent existence of the world, sometimes referred to as the “real world”, as opposed to a world of human perception. In the “real world” scenario, all things are ultimately reducible objects, that act and are acted upon as a result of pre-disposed characteristics or properties, which can be explained in scientific terms (i.e. that of atoms and molecules and the exchange of energy). All actions are the causal, mechanical reactions to an earlier action and human agency is non-existent beyond this. Therefore the existence and function of the world is independent of our knowledge and recognition of it.

On the other side of this debate lies transcendentalism, the traditional domain of academic philosophers, who argue the existence of a transcendental subject (the human being) around whom the objective world is formed. In this scenario, the subject is the central figure with almost God-like abilities to determine via his/her judgment or intelligence his/her course of action and to make sense of the world. This viewpoint places the potential of human agency above all other facets of the world. What is “real”, therefore, is what “I”¹² make of it or how “I” perceive it to be. But what happens when “the facts as they are” faction meet “the truth as I see it” camp in the ongoing debate on the self?

Husserlian transcendental phenomenology

The answer seems to lie with the retrospectively named phenomenological movement that reached its peak popularity in academic circles during the first half of

¹¹ The broadness of these movements is further accentuated in the fact that there is a multiplicity of nuanced positions within each of the movements, which I will not deal with in this paper.

¹² “I” here represents both the individual and the collective.

the twentieth century, under the auspices of such luminaries as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Roman Ingarden, Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul Ricoeur. At its most basic level of definition, phenomenology is said to be the study of experience or perception of things as they occur in the phenomenal world (Hammond et al, 1991). As such, phenomenology accounts both for things “as they really are” and “as I see them”. This is a pivotal point in the philosophy of phenomenology as it acknowledges the importance of the individual experience of objects of independent existence, as opposed to the existence of an ultimate, objective truth or essence (such as that of empiricism and transcendentalism) about the world around us.

The roots of phenomenology (as we know it today) stem largely from the works of Edmund Husserl who is generally recognised as the “father” of phenomenology, although the basis for his theories can undoubtedly be traced beyond Husserl himself in some more primordial form. Husserl’s concept of intentionality, for instance, is influenced by the work of Franz Brentano¹³. Given the length and scope the exploration of the origins of phenomenology is likely to involve however, it is not my intent to engage in a debate on this point¹⁴, but to seek an understanding of some of the theories that pervade current consciousness.

It is consequently more important to note that the research and theories that have since evolved have diverged considerably from those foundations¹⁵; and it is therefore difficult to give a finite definition of phenomenology¹⁶. There is however a common purpose which exists throughout much of the phenomenological movement.

In her autobiography, *The Prime of Life*, Simone de Beauvoir gives an account of a

¹³ *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874).

¹⁴ Spiegelberg gives an excellent account of this issue in *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (1982).

¹⁵ Husserl’s own later works diverge from his initial course.

¹⁶ Spiegelberg writes that “the difficulties of stating point-blank what phenomenology is are almost notorious. Even after it had established itself as a movement conscious of its own identity, it kept reinterpreting its own meaning to an extent that makes it impossible to rely on a standard definition for the purpose of historical inclusion or exclusion” (1982:1).

meeting between Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron. During this meeting, de Beauvoir relates, Aron quite acutely defines the basic premise of phenomenology as the philosophy which allows the philosopher “to describe objects as he saw and touched them, and extract philosophy from the process” (de Beauvoir, 1962:112). It is with this statement in mind that I shall approach a general understanding of phenomenology, although it will probably exclude some other interpretations and might in time (considering the dynamic quality of the phenomenological movement thus far) be regarded as no longer a relevant or sustainable argument.

What can also be generally said about the phenomenological movement is that it began as an attempted departure from the tradition of Cartesian dualism that had, at the point of phenomenology’s inception, dominated Western philosophy in its exploration of the self and its relation to the world. While they may disagree on the exact approach and supporting arguments and ideas, phenomenologists generally concur that the phenomenological method is, above all, not an *empirical* one. To this end, phenomenology, for the most part, eschews objective, scientific claims in favour of a more subjective, lived or experiential approach. Moreover, this subjectivity is not conceived as separate from some factual *reality*. Instead, our experience and perception of the external world is indistinguishable from said reality. Thus, it is the argument of phenomenology that

“descriptions of phenomena are not of what is distinct from the real, but simply of how one experiences things; and included here is how in some cases one in fact distinguishes between the experience of what is real and of what is only apparent. That is, any distinction between the real and the apparent is one that operates within the more general category of ‘the phenomena’” (Hammond et al, 1991:2).

Hence, phenomenology does not deny the pre-cognisant existence of things, and argues that substances and forms have an existence independent of the human self. What is real to us about things, however, is what we experience and come to know of their multifaceted manifestations, and it is only through experience that we can know what is real.

For instance, a four-year old child knows about skipping, running and jumping because he/she has experienced the action of skipping, running and jumping. What he/she does not know, however, is how the brain, the nerves and muscles work to bring about the different actions; the way a student of human movement may perceive and study the action of skipping, running or jumping. Thus, reality is an odd brew of what we have before us, what we know, what we imagine things to be and what we believe is unimaginable. What is real to us speaks of the presence and absences of our experience, and not necessarily that of the physical world.

The phenomenological movement diverged into two main streams during the 1930s that can almost be categorised by their geographical as well as ideological location¹⁷. These streams were known as transcendental phenomenology or the German phenomenological movement, and existential phenomenology or the French phenomenological movement. Husserl was, of course, one of the best known of the German phenomenologists; although there were many others who followed (Ingarden, Scheler, Heidegger) whose works are still considered significant today¹⁸.

The German stream of phenomenology is, however, still strongly associated with Husserl. This particular manifestation of the phenomenological movement

¹⁷ As much as one can categorise anything within the phenomenological movement.

¹⁸ The works of the main figures in the European phenomenological movement now appear to dominate much of modern, European philosophy and arguably that of Australian philosophy as well.

“ascribes to the reflecting Ego a constitutive role with respect to the ‘real’ world: the sense or meaning of the latter is provided by the former, the transcendental ego, which is not itself a part of that world, but rather is presupposed by it. Furthermore, Husserl maintained that this transcendental ego has various essential ‘structures’, whose nature can be investigated by a second level of phenomenological reduction which he termed ‘eidetic’, involving the discovery of ‘essences’” (Hammond et al, 1991:5).

The discovery of these essences¹⁹ was one of the central issues of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. To this end, he developed the notion of phenomenological and eidetic reduction as a means of finding the timeless essences of all phenomena. The transcendental Ego was the one irreducible essence; it was the finite unit (so to speak) of phenomenological reduction and was distinct from both the physical and psychological self.

Husserl distinguished between two types of phenomenological reductions: eidetic reduction and phenomenological reduction. The former is the “reduction from mere particular facts to general essences” (Spiegelberg, 1982:119)²⁰. The latter, phenomenological reduction (sometimes referred to as transcendental reduction), “implies a reflective turn to transcendental subjectivity in which the pure phenomena are constituted” (Spiegelberg, 1982:752)²¹. Both types of phenomenological reductions required the practice of bracketing or *epoché* (suspension of judgment) of the phenomena in question from its environment (social, physical, ideological) in

¹⁹ Essence, as used by Husserl, is a kind of universal or absolute quality.

²⁰ Eidetic reduction would require us to look at a dog, for instance, and determine its essence by imagining it as a puppy, as an older dog, a female or a male dog and to then determine the essence/s, the unchanging factor/s that make it still a dog throughout these imagined changes.

²¹ Phenomenological reduction would require us to look at a dog and, ‘separating’ it from the worldly definitions that tell us ‘this is a dog’, examine our experience or perception that makes us think the creature before is a dog.

order to better study it. Rather like a scientific experiment conducted in a controlled laboratory environment, only in this case the process of bracketing is an abstract one. In this way, Husserl believed that we could reflect upon the phenomena divested of pre-conceived prejudice and thus approach its “natural attitude”, that is, its pre-existing properties.

There are clearly many problems that arise from Husserl’s conception of reduction that he himself acknowledged but was never really able to rectify²². The most immediate of which is his conception of the Ego as the ultimate and timeless essence that gives meaning to all other things. This argument is flawed at different levels; the first being that the Ego (as defined by Husserl) appears to take the corporeal form out of the equation of self, reducing the body to just another object to which the Ego lends meaning or significance.

Husserl’s argument of the Ego as ultimate essence also robs things of their immanent significance, when our observation of the world shows us that

“the way things appear is part of the being of things; things appear as they are, and they are as they appear. Things do not just exist; they also manifest themselves as what they are” (Sokolowski, 2000:14).

Let us take, for instance, the sharp point of the needle. That it is sharp is the intrinsic manifestation of a needle, and that is meaning in itself. It is not a meaning that we accord to it, although we may give it other meanings that relate to its being intrinsically sharp.

²² Although, it must be said, he continued to maintain its validity to phenomenological research.

As we filter down along Husserl's Ego-based theory of phenomenology, we see also that we must question if a complete suspension of our "belief" or being-in-the-world (as phenomenological reduction seems to require) is entirely possible. The suspension of our being-in-the-world presupposes our ability to assume an uninvolved or neutral point of view when studying a phenomenon. That is, to penetrate subjective viewpoints and see the object in its "natural attitude". But again we must question what is the "natural attitude" of any object or event, and how do we recognise when we have seen this "natural attitude"?

Another problem of Husserl's use of phenomenological and eidetic reductions is that it is a search for a timeless essence which exists only in that moment, and when bracketed or reduced really becomes something else existing in another moment. Reflection, for instance, is a form of experience in itself. Moreover, no experience can be completely translucent (as Husserl suggests they can be) and, again, any attempt to elucidate it transforms it into something else. As such, there is something indescribable and indefinable about things and events. It is like peeling away the layers of an onion to find its true essence. At the end of this exercise all you will have are pieces of onion. You will be no closer to discovering the essence of an onion as an onion is made up of all its layers and, when disassembled, becomes something else.

Husserl's reduction assumes the determinacy of the world: in other words, that there is an exhaustible quantity of descriptions that can be applied to any one object. The consequence of a determinate world is that we are able to identify its universal qualities and in doing so identify its essence. It also suggests that all objects and phenomena are completely transparent when reduced and the process of reduction can uncover *all* its qualities, paving the way to a complete understanding or knowledge. Most of all, it assumes that the Ego or self is capable of taking on an objective

viewpoint and thus see things in their “natural attitude”. While this is undoubtedly a rather simplistic analysis of Husserl’s work, it still highlights the issues that have arisen time and again in critical studies on Husserlian phenomenology (Scheler [1973], Derrida [1981 & 2003]).

Transcendental phenomenology is plagued by some of the same issues that troubled the transcendental movement as a whole. While transcendental phenomenology gave much stock to human perception and judgement, it also failed to fully account for the material existence of the world-at-large or the variability of human experience by suggesting the practice of *epoché* or bracketing as a means of forming an accurate, objective view. By making the Ego the ultimate/quintessential essence of our being, it also distanced the self from the looming presence of its own corporeal existence.

Existential phenomenology

The French phenomenological movement, on the other hand, is also known as existential phenomenology, mainly because it drew as much from the existential movement that was prevalent in academic work at the time as it did the work on phenomenology begun by Husserl. Existential phenomenology embraces the notion of the body as a lived experience. In so doing, the traditional distinction between body and mind are broken down and a new understanding of being-in-the-world and consciousness is attained. Existential phenomenology also talks about particular selves and particular experiences, therefore returning not only the individual but, more significantly) temporality to phenomenological theory.

Like transcendental philosophy, existential phenomenology argues that human beings are self-determining creatures who are immanent in themselves. For

existentialists, however, the soul or Ego is not of some higher realm, removed from this world; that is, a state of being to which we *transcend*. Rather, the transcendent being is in fact a state of being that is attained *in-this-world*. For existential phenomenology, there is no transcendent realm or state somewhere outside our current awareness or existence. Existential phenomenology is very much about the here and now and what we do in it.

The best-known French phenomenologist is of course Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) whose prolific work has been discussed by many before and will undoubtedly continue to be the subject of further discussion. It is from the work of the lesser-known (but by no means lesser) French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), however, that the most radical variant of phenomenology yet has emerged. Merleau-Ponty drew his ideas from the three major philosophical movements of his time: phenomenology, existentialism and Marxism, all of which were ideals to which he subscribed (Bannan, 1967). He sought in his work to unify those elements from all three movements that he felt could at last give rise to a philosophy that could accurately account for the phenomena of which is this world.

Merleau-Ponty's work is regarded as suspect by some, due in some part to his of radical interpretations of Husserl²³. Moreover, as Bannan observes, "in its original statement Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is difficult. His thought develops in an orderly way, but the order is complex and not easy to follow" (Bannan, 1967:vii). Even his stature in the academic community was not clearly defined in his lifetime. Merleau-Ponty appeared to be something of an outsider even in the phenomenological circle, as his works were almost never commented upon by his contemporaries despite his

²³ While being an admirer of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty is rather critical of his published work and instead supports ideas of Husserl's which were often derived from his unpublished work (Spiegelberg, 1982).

prolific commentary on theirs²⁴. This was possibly a consequence of his unusual views, with terminology that is neither familiar nor completely consistent.²⁵

The progress of his research was also abruptly shortened by his early death while still writing his most radical work *The Visible and the Invisible*. This has of course, broken the thread of his work which, from time to time, various individuals have tried to build upon. More recently, the work initiated by Merleau-Ponty has been taken up by academics searching for a more body-centred means of philosophising the self. These include theorists involved in women's studies, neuro-psychology, theatre studies and comparative philosophy.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and *The Phenomenology of Perception*

Existential phenomenology, as defined by Merleau-Ponty, can at times prove confusing as he adopts many of the terms that Husserl applies to transcendental phenomenology. In fact, Merleau-Ponty states in his preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* that all phenomenology should be transcendental. Here, Merleau-Ponty means to be able to describe how one experiences the world as one experiences it, without the interference of expectations and assumptions about the experience, as opposed to another usage of Husserl's which suggests "the activity of reducing all experiences to the life of the transcendental ego" (Hammond et al, 1991:263). For Merleau-Ponty, it is the rejection of the latter meaning of transcendental which

²⁴ It should be noted that he did edit, together with Sartre, the journal *Les Temps Modernes* as well as a *Bibliothèque de Philosophie* and that in 1952 he attained a chair at the Collège de France. This was regarded as "unprecedentedly early" (Spiegelberg, 1982:537) - he was at the time the youngest person ever to hold that chair which he retained till his death - particularly in view of the fact that the position was once held by Henri Bergson (Bergson was a 20th century French philosopher who is known to have influenced philosophers such as Deleuze (1966) Levinas (1930) as well as Merleau-Ponty).

²⁵ Probably because the terminology to explain his ideas did not yet exist in his time and is even now not properly established.

differentiates transcendental phenomenology from existential phenomenology (Hammond et al, 1991). While transcendental phenomenology focuses on the Ego, existential phenomenology turns to the significance of the lived experience as the main source of its study.

Using perception as the foundation of his theories, Merleau-Ponty takes us on an exploration of the “inner” experience of self by looking through the eyes of the individual. This gives a unique opportunity of constructing a philosophy of self from a point of view that is engaged with its argument and unable and unwilling to pretend at objectivity. For as an existentialist, Merleau-Ponty was committed to an understanding of the

“human subject as essentially ‘embodied’, and hence neither entirely free nor self-transparent; and of its ‘world’, consisting of the intended objects of bodily action and perception, as neither fully determined, causally, nor determinate (‘clear-cut’), and hence not straightforwardly accessible to the empirical sciences’ (Hammond et al, 1991:7).

By combining his philosophy with medical case studies, Merleau-Ponty also provides us with a theory of self that is grounded in the reality of the life-world, a point that is particularly important to the development of his philosophy.

What makes Merleau-Ponty’s arguments suspect to some is that his definition and explanation of empiricism, transcendentalism and their methods and philosophy can be interpreted as being quite simplistic. His interpretations of Husserl were radically different from those of other philosophers in his day and even now are considered questionable due to his reliance on Husserl’s lesser known works (as previously mentioned). Moreover, the examples that he cites of empirical and

transcendental research are often not from known advocates of the philosophy but from psychologists and physiologists without an overt allegiance to any particular philosophy of thought.

Merleau-Ponty adopts a dialectical mode of argument²⁶ in which he reasons, through the use of examples of lived experiences, why empiricism and transcendentalism are doomed to fail as an adequate means of accounting for the world as phenomena. While never explicitly concluding the absolute failure of either, he proves, via his repetition of various cases and situations, that they are nonetheless inadequate philosophies. He then goes on to posit his own philosophy of existential phenomenology which derives characteristics from both empiricism and transcendentalism. His point here is not so much to disprove the theories of empiricism or transcendentalism, but to show that empiricists and transcendentalists have missed a vital understanding of the world in their blind reliance on objective thought.

Here, “objective thought” is defined as the understanding that knowledge precedes experience. Hence there exists an absolute and immutable truth, and the objects, ideas and events that make up this world are discrete units, divisible from their background or context. According to Merleau-Ponty it is this limited perception of the world which forms the greatest fallacy of empirical and transcendental philosophy. He argues instead that these phenomena are experienced *in-the-world* and hence must be understood as such.

Similarly, his belief that philosophy should be engaged²⁷ leads him to cite psychologists and physiologists, people who study and explain real-life cases instead

²⁶ Similar to that of Heidegger’s *Dialectical Critique*.

²⁷ “Involved in or committed to action, particularly social action” (Spiegelberg, 1982:545).

of imagined scenarios of the purely theoretical arguments that he felt many of his colleagues adopted. As Hammond, Howarth and Keat observe,

“a striking feature of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is that its philosophical arguments are conducted largely through the detailed examination of substantive theories about human action and perception; and that consequently the writings of psychologists and physiologists are given equal prominence to those of philosophers” (1991:127).

Since his understanding of philosophy is that it is to be engaged or involved in the world, Merleau-Ponty surmises that his studies must also reflect this and thus uses examples derived from actual experiences to both show the inadequacies of rival theories and as a means of illustrating his own philosophy. It is for this reason why I choose to talk about my experiences both as a dancer and a dance teacher in this thesis. Having spent a large part of my life practising this art form and now imparting what I know of it to others and being defined by myself and by others by this practice, I find in the reflections that I perform a lived experience of the philosophy of phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty's arguments tend also to take a rather circular route, in the sense that he starts with one problem, seems to offer a solution, then returns again to find the same problem in this solution. The apparent insolubility of his work may seem to render it suspect and even redundant. However, this insolubility points to the fundamental fault of conventional objectivist thinking, which is also the basic premise for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological thought: that lived experiences are difficult if not impossible to apprehend without some degree of accountability for the subjectivity of individual perception. More importantly, it is not Merleau-Ponty's

intent to provide finite answers. For him, philosophy is a never-ending exploration of the lived experience and the lived world that is continually evolving and always specific.

Merleau-Ponty does not completely disparage the claims of empiricism (as represented by science) and transcendentalism (as represented by transcendental phenomenology). He does in fact adopt (and adapt) some terms and concepts that form part of the litany of empiricism and transcendentalism. This is because his main objection to them lay not so much in the views that they forwarded but in the assumptions about the world that inevitably arose from their reliance on what he refers to as an objectivist mode of thought²⁸. Merleau-Ponty felt so strongly about this inadequacy of the objective mode of thought, so blindly (in his view) utilised by empiricism and transcendentalism, that he devoted a significant portion of both *The Structure of Behavior* and *The Phenomenology of Perception* to establishing this point.

In contrast to the objectivist route taken by empiricism and transcendentalism, Merleau-Ponty says that we cannot assume the determinacy of the world and the events that occur in it. “Objective thought maintains that one can *in principle* give a complete description of objects – comprising, in effect, a fully specified list of the properties which each object possesses” (Hammond et al, 1991:133). This, says Merleau-Ponty, is the failing of objectivist thought: that it is applicable only in theory. When put to more practical use, objectivist thought cannot account for the deviations from a set of absolute truths and inevitably explains away these anomalies largely by using the inconsistency of human perception as the reason for such aberration. Hence, the failure of objectivist thought lies not only in its attempts to describe experiences in

²⁸ Objectivist thought (also regarded as the conventional Western mode of thought) arose as part of the object-subject split or dualism of Cartesian philosophy.

determinate terms, but also in the highly idealised terms that it uses; terms that are far removed from our actual experience. This practice is further supported by discounting the accuracy and legitimacy of real experiences in favour of these idealised notions of normality.

Set within the boundaries of what Merleau-Ponty called objectivist thought or objectivism, both empiricism and transcendentalism necessarily made assumptions about the determinacy of the world we live in. These assumptions invariably failed, in his opinion, to sufficiently describe the complexity of the phenomena of the world.

“For Merleau-Ponty, what is wrong with objective thought is not just the idealised ‘purity’ of the primary properties and the absence of secondary ones. It is also the assumed determinacy of all properties and objects, and the supposed externality of the relations between them” (Hammond et al, 1991:160-161)²⁹.

By taking their reliance on objective thought for granted, Merleau-Ponty (1962) claimed that empiricists and transcendentalists forget that it is their task to understand the nature of human perception (how we perceive, interpret, understand and determine what is to be true and false). Objective thought (i.e. the process of rationalisation) is part of the phenomena of human experience to be questioned and explored by philosophical inquiry, and not the rule against which human experience is measured and explained. It is not therefore the purpose of empiricists and transcendentalists to provide their own set of truths and falsehoods using this process of rationalisation, and to provide an ultimate and irrefutable statement on the world.

²⁹ “A relationship is external if the related items can be identified without reference to one another. Conversely, items are internally related if they cannot be independently identified” (Hammond et al, 1991:136). As such, all objects are regarded by Merleau-Ponty to be internally related as we cannot correctly identify what something is without implying what it is not.

In support of his argument, Merleau-Ponty argues that human perception *is* inconsistent and this inconsistency must therefore be accounted for in order to fully explore and comprehend the complexities of the world. The followers of objectivist thought may agree that every object possesses a set of determinate and mutually non-exclusive properties which, for the empiricist, can be scientifically proven. However, real-life experiences often show us that a particular action does not always have the same meaning every time it occurs. For instance, one can stretch one's leg as a means of releasing tensed muscles or, as a way of showing off one's flexibility. Consequently, experience cannot be divided and categorised into discrete units of sensations and implications but must be viewed in the larger context of its occurrence.

Thus, all these facts and proofs of what "actually is" are irrelevant in Merleau-Ponty's point of view since

"non-determinacy is primarily a characteristic of what is actually experienced in the world, and only derivatively of the concepts employed to describe this"
(Hammond et al, 1991:135).

For Merleau-Ponty, the so-called facts or concepts are secondary to the individual response to or perception of any situation or object. He focuses instead on trying to describe the experience and in trying understand the way in which we develop our understandings and perceptions.

It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty adopts a *transcendental* approach to phenomenology. He emphasises the importance of perception, defining it as the

“consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:ix).

As such, the *I* or the *self*, both physical and intellectual, constitute the foundation from which *my* knowledge emerges. This self is neither determinate for the individual or the larger community. It is always mutable or, as Merleau-Ponty might say, historical. Knowledge does not therefore constitute absolute truth. It is only truthful within a specific context. Because of this variability in the truth, it is more beneficial in Merleau-Ponty’s opinion to study the process through which we learn such truths and come to accept them rather than perform analyses on the knowledge itself. Moreover, in studying and understanding the process through which we learn, we develop a better understanding also of how the self is cultivated in this process of learning.

It is interesting to note here that Merleau-Ponty’s preferred method of arguing his point of view was to draw on case studies from psychological and physiological research that were made up of what we would conventionally term “abnormal” examples of human behaviour and experience of self. In addition to the phantom limb³⁰ syndrome and anosognosia³¹, he performed a detailed analysis on the case of a World War I veteran named Schneider who suffered a head wound that damaged the visual cortex of his brain. This injury subsequently led to his inability to perform abstract movements³² and to judge the spatial arrangement of his own body without relying on tactile self-stimulus.

Critics of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy often question the validity of his reliance on studies of abnormality to formulate a theory of human experience. To

³⁰ Patients suffering from phantom limb syndrome are usually amputees who still feel their presence of the amputated limb.

³¹ Patients suffering from anosognosia often experience dissociation from their own diseased or injured limb.

³² That is, movements with no end goal such as retrieving an object. The focus instead is on the movement itself such as tracing a circle in the air.

justify his strategy, let us look at one of the basic premises of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: that experience precedes (or rather that experience is) knowledge.

“In ascribing this new status to the body, Merleau-Ponty is also revising and reinterpreting the nature of the powers traditionally ascribed to the subject by idealists. In particular, he argues that, whilst ‘knowledge’ and ‘intentionality’ are possessed by the body-subject, these must be understood as essentially practical and pre-conscious in character, unlike their idealist counterparts” (Hammond et al, 1991:162).

As such, it becomes only logical that he should develop his philosophy from “real-life” experiences, that is, from *practical* sources. But why then does he single out instances of “abnormal” behaviour?

Having danced for many years, it was not until I was introduced to a body technique called *Pilates* that I gained significant new insight to the workings of my body and dance technique. *Pilates* is what I would describe as a kind of physical bracketing. In *Pilates*, we focus on our breathing pattern, place our bodies in different spatial alignments and/or use our muscles to perform movements which may be removed from our everyday physical behaviour³³. By introducing an “abnormality” into our sense of “normality” (such as lying down to perform *plies*³⁴), it creates a new focus for the attainment of an understanding previously beyond our grasp. The assumption here is that in assuming a different posture, we also assume a different

³³ Other similar body techniques such as Feldenkrais, the Alexander Technique and yoga all work in the same fashion of focussing on the body by controlling our breathing, placing the body in different positions and using tactile stimuli.

³⁴ Knee bends.

frame of mind³⁵. Similarly, Schneider's "abnormality" gives us something concrete to compare against our "normal" experience in order to create a starting point for a discussion on human experience.

There are, of course, flaws in this argument. Performing a *plié* lying down is very different to performing a *plié* while standing up. It is a different kind of experience and while some similarities can be drawn between the two and insight on one gained from the other, it is an insight that is not directly applicable and requires some modification³⁶. What is more important in the process is the *awakening* such bracketing brings, that is, the awakening or opening of one's self to new avenues of thought and action. This is what Merleau-Ponty requires of his philosophy: that it should awaken our self awareness and be a *process* that is adaptable to the various situations it may be applied to. It is this window of understanding, and not a fixed structure of thought, that is the key of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty's book *The Phenomenology of Perception* made several significant deviations from the general trend of the phenomenological movement of his day. In particular, he re-defined the existing phenomenological methodology in order to return to the kind of phenomenological description he saw as the essence of Husserl's earlier work on phenomenology. To this end, he insisted on the notion that consciousness was essentially engaged or embodied. He also developed what some people refer to as a "bipolar phenomenology" (Spiegelberg, 1982), which explored perception as a common ground for both subjective and objective experience. Merleau-Ponty believed that this would prevent a return to the antagonistic opposition between subjectivity and objectivity that he felt was the fundamental error in

³⁵ Much like the postures that meditative techniques require practitioners to assume in order to attain mental/spiritual development.

³⁶ For instance, even after making some headway in *Pilates*, it still required some work and time spent dancing before I actually improved my dance technique.

traditional philosophies of the self. Moreover, he thought that this common ground of perception would more appropriately reflect the ambiguity of the lived experience that is never purely objective or subjective.

The Phenomenology of Perception, his second publication, is also probably his most widely read text. In this book he maps out his vision of phenomenology, particularly in relation to human perception and action. While inspired by the work of Husserl, he is nonetheless critical of him, perceiving inadequacies in his theories that prevented the development of an effective philosophy of phenomenology. In the preface of this book he defines phenomenology as

“the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts the essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’. It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a ‘rigorous science’, but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we ‘live’ them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide” (1962, p.vii).

Phenomenology is, according to Merleau-Ponty, therefore is a study of the world as it is in its current, lived experience. It does not try to search for the origins of self but instead attempts to understand the self as it exists in the here and now. He begins the book with a critical review of traditional philosophical views on perception that have already been examined earlier in this chapter. He subsequently rejects these traditional views so as to establish an alternative theory based on experiential perception.

From his arguments in the case of Schneider (in particular) we can infer that Merleau-Ponty was moving toward a new understanding of phenomenology's traditional use of language and its theorisation of the many facets of human experience. Perhaps the most significant feature of Merleau-Ponty's vision of phenomenology (one which explains a considerable portion of his theoretical direction) was his recognition of the intrinsic role of the body in his understanding of consciousness. This basic assertion forms the foundation of Merleau-Ponty's fundamental tenet, that of the "primacy of perception". This focus on embodiment is one that he maintained until his last, unfinished text, *The Visible and the Invisible*, in which we see the beginnings of an insight (unfortunately uncompleted) into the complex nature of the lived self.

One of the first steps to understanding Merleau-Ponty's work on phenomenology is to put aside all pre-conceived notions we may have derived from Cartesian duality. This is particularly pertinent when considering the language that is applied in Merleau-Ponty's argument. His language is derived from that of his philosophical predecessors, which not only bears the mark of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, but also comes with its own historical and often Cartesian assumptions and associations. To begin it is particularly useful to first make a

distinction between the use of “consciousness” and “awareness” as applied in this thesis.

Consciousness, as defined by Merleau-Ponty, reaches beyond the working of the mind to include the sensorial faculties of an embodied self. The concept of the embodied or lived self

“attempts to cut beneath the subject-object split, recognising a dialectical and lived dualism but not a dualism of body-soul or body-mind. A phenomenological (or lived) dualism implicates consciousness and intention and assumes an indivisible unity of body, soul, and mind” (Fraleigh, 1987:4).

Our own experience also tells us that we possess consciousness because we have something to be conscious with, and that our actions have intent because we possess the consciousness to give them meaning. After all, without consciousness how much different is the body from any other machine capable of movement? Without a body, what should we be conscious with? Thus it would appear that the individual and his/her consciousness is both body and mind, distinct yet inseparable, with each component sharing equally the responsibilities of being a functional individual in the world.

While our consciousness is always intentional, always directed by and towards things, events or ideas, it is also an instinctive facility. The consciousness of the body does not require *awareness* for a perception of and response to stimuli (e.g. when we sweat when we are *conscious* of the humidity, but are not necessarily *aware* of the humidity). This distinction between consciousness and awareness in our lived experience (which Merleau-Ponty holds as the key to phenomenological research)

also shows us that while our actions (or non-action) are always intended, they do not always have meaning. Body and mind are not always in unison with each other and our bodies do not always function as we desire them to; nor do we always mean what our bodies do³⁷. As such,

“our body does not always have meaning, and our thoughts, on the other hand – in timidity for example – do not always find in it the plenitude of their vital expression. In these cases of disintegration, the soul and the body are apparently distinct; and this is the truth of dualism” (Fraleigh, 1987:12).

This argument is an inevitable counterpoint to the proposal of a cohesive duality. One cannot philosophically speak of duality without the possibility of disunity between its components. Our own experience tells us so.

Consequently, as the self is not two separate entities but one entity composed of functional differences, it should be noted that when Merleau-Ponty speaks of the duality of the body,

“he is not speaking of a ‘duality of substances’, as traditional dualistic theories posit. He holds that the notions of soul and body must be related and offers a view of body and soul that interweaves, rather than separates them” (Fraleigh, 1987:12).

The lived body is not, therefore, merely imbued with a sense of consciousness; it is consciousness itself. This consciousness is both “*originale*” and “*originaire*” of all

³⁷ Just think of all those people trying to lose weight, our inadvertent sneezes or athletes trying to better their performances and we see that our control over our actions has its limits.

intention, and it “is already involved by previous commitment and ultimately by its birth and ‘incarnation’ in a certain body in space, and, equally important, in history” (Spiegelberg, 1982:565). Thus, the conscious body is both our irreducible source of knowledge and understanding as well as the foundation for attaining further knowledge of the external world.

For instance, although conventional thinking categorises our activities as belonging to the domain of the mental or the corporeal, our experience of the learning process, the process by which we cultivate and develop a sense of self in the community, itself cannot be so simplistically described. Instead,

“the learning process is systematic: the subject does not weld together the individual movements and individual stimuli but acquires the power to respond with a certain general form” (Hammond et al, 1991:142).

For instance, if we feel an itch on our nose we do not react by thinking “I must contract my arm muscles in order to raise my arm so that my finger can reach my nose. Now I must contract and relax my finger muscles in order to produce the scratching motion to ease the itch”³⁸. Our thoughts (if indeed any should pass through our active awareness in this instance) rarely go beyond “I need to scratch my nose,” which is the intent that produces the subsequent reaction.

At such moments, thought and action are one and knowledge, therefore, “is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:144). That is, the knowledge that I must contract my arm and finger muscles in order to scratch my nose is simultaneous with

³⁸ Even this is but a brief description of what really occurs in terms of bio-physical mechanics.

the action itself. Moreover, without this body, we could not comprehend its function and movement that is specific to the particular physical form that I am.

This knowledge does not come to us in its component parts either. We do not learn to scratch our nose by first learning to contract our individual muscles. It is a knowledge that is attained as an entire pattern, not like some jigsaw to be assembled piece by piece when the need arises.

“In getting things right, a person is simply regulating his actions; he is not involved in two processes, one of doing and another of theorising. Moving with a purpose does not necessitate, as is the common supposition, thinking or theorising before acting. It does involve the exercise of mind and intelligence in fulfilment of that purpose” (Fraleigh, 1987:162).

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty refers to this phenomena as the intentional arc “which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation” (1962:136). Unlike the cause and effect or association models of human perception and response (i.e. x brings about y reaction), the intentional arc functions on the basis of a network³⁹. In such a system, a history of specific perceptions and knowledge are not stored as memory by the individual self. Instead, what we call memory is a set of paradigms or patterns of action whereby a given sensation or situation, once linked with a certain response, will continue to produce that response or something similar to it. This paradigm can also be adapted for use when we find ourselves outside of our normal situation (e.g. having to dance on a theatre-in-the-round stage as opposed to a proscenium arch

³⁹ Hubert L. Dreyfus (1996) draws a parallel with Merleau-Ponty’s description of the intentional network and the neural network model.

stage). In addition, our capacity to respond to any situation is regulated by such constraints as applied by society and our physical environment and it is through these constraints that human beings can lay claim to a shared heritage or identity.

However, the intentionality of the body (or the body of intention) goes beyond the mere execution of movements. In the field of dance for instance, the learning process shows us a kind of progression of intention from concern for the mechanical (e.g. technique) to concern for the abstract (e.g. the projection of emotion or characterisation). As such,

“to understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in the world. When I put my hand to my knee, I experience at every stage of the movement the fulfilment of an intention which was not directed at my knee as an idea or even as an object, but as a present and real part of my living body, that is, finally, as a stage in my perpetual movement towards a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:144-145).

In dance, we begin as students learning the mechanics of dance movement. Our concentration at this stage is usually on the development and correction of our physical technique. As the execution of movement begins to come more easily to us, we then focus on the performance and expression of the movement, trying to convey some meaning or idea such as strength or joy. Ultimately, we want the movement to surpass this stage of being a medium or representation of expression to *be* that emotion or feeling itself⁴⁰. Hence, our intention (as represented in the schematic

⁴⁰This, of course, refers to dance forms and choreography that are interested in conveying ideas and emotions through dance.

example below) progresses from wanting to execute a movement correctly to wanting to convey meaning through our dancing.

Intent (to portray a swan) → physical mechanics → swan-like movement → result (a swan in motion)

Needless to say, in the instance of performance itself, all these thoughts and concerns do not run through our awareness (if they did, the moment of performance would be lost). A dancer portraying a swan in *Swan Lake* does not step on stage thinking, “I am going to do this step in that way so that it conveys the feeling and movement of a swan”⁴¹. To think or reflect removes us from the moment of action and will probably create that disjuncture which impairs our intended portrayal. For a performance to be successful, the dancers’ “movement displays their judgment; it is not prefaced by it. They are not thinking and doing; they think what they are doing” (Fraleigh, 1987:163). Thus, the conscious body responds to the situation (e.g. performing on stage) by producing this system of knowledge we have assembled over time and with experience. There are, of course, times when we do not achieve our intent. The conscious body functions at an optimal level, and at times we may fall in or out of that level as a result of external interference or internal obstacles. These, again, can be overcome through the accumulation and application of our experiential knowledge.

This knowledge that an individual possesses is held both by the corporeal body as well as the mind. Hence, our knowledge is part of our conscious body and is stored in our mental processes, our muscles, our synapses and our nervous system. Knowledge is embodied and the application of this knowledge requires “a

⁴¹ This is something Sylvie Guillem talks about in the documentary *Sylvie Guillem* (1992), directed by Nigel Wattis.

concentration of the whole person as a minded body, not a mind in command of something separable called body” (Fraleigh, 1987:9). Moreover, tapping in to this knowledge does not require active thought on the part of the conscious body. Experience and skill enables us to draw upon it without the necessity for such reflection.

I still recall an occasion when I had to perform in front of a small audience some years back. Not having performed for almost two years, I was feeling quite nervous despite being extremely familiar with the dances I was to perform that day. On stepping onstage for the first dance, my mind drew a blank as it searched desperately for a clue as to how the dance started. I was in a complete state of shock. As the music began however, the need for active thought receded as the conscious body took over, responding to the music as part of that network of knowledge stored in my embodied memory. In truth, this has happened on many occasions when either lack of practice or momentary panic has driven all memory from my awareness. Once the music begins however, it is as if I have been brought back into a time and place when the knowledge was fresh and I can once again move as if I have never stopped performing the dance. As such, my experience in the performance of those dances and of performance in general served as a source of knowledge from which I could draw upon the established patterns of movement to proceed with the performance at hand.

Therefore, rather than analysing knowledge in the traditional Cartesian components of the physical and mental, I prefer to think of knowledge as being part of my *embodiment*. On reading Merleau-Ponty’s work, Dreyfus (1996) observed that our embodiment occurs on three levels: embodiment as an innate structure (e.g. our corporeal make-up, state of being-within-the-world and innate consciousness); embodiment as basic functional skills (e.g. walking) and embodiment as culturally

specific skills (e.g. the use of eating tools). This embodiment, our lived experience or knowledge, is at all three levels both a unique and shared experience for the individual. In expressing this idea, Fraleigh writes that

“as a dancer I am both universalised (like dancers in every culture and time) and personalised (I am my own unrepeatable body; I am my own dance)” (1987:29)

It would appear, then, that lived experiences are unique because they occur in specific bodies in a specific time and space. Yet lived experiences can also be shared or universal because our corporeality and our being-within-the-world is a manner of existence (albeit in different ways) which we have in common with other people. After all, we share a physicality (head, arms, legs, body, heart, liver, etc) with other humans that create shared experiences which are different from those of a cat. Some of us share certain social or cultural experiences (that of a dancer, that of being Chinese, that of being a teacher) that give us a commonality while separating us from others.

In addition, the knowledge we master, whether as part of everyday life or as a more deliberate cultivation, is by no means fixed, but very much variable. After all, a person who may have spent his/her entire life walking over flat terrain would not suddenly be unable to walk when faced with a hilly pasture. Certainly his/her muscles may ache a little after the unusual activity, but he/she would still be able to walk across this new landscape without having to actively think about how to do it.

Thus, the knowledge that comes with experience serves not only as a response to situations we may have encountered previously but also as a preparation for new situations we may not have encountered before. An example Merleau-Ponty employs

in this regard is the organist's mastery over his/her musical instrument of choice. He observes that mastery of an organ enables him/her to play not just that specific organ (i.e. the one he/she has always practised on) but any other organ he/she may come across. Moreover the master organist would only require a brief period of practice, lesser than that he/she took to first learn to play an organ, to become comfortable with the new organ.

In dance, such comparisons can also be drawn from observing a dance student with limited experience and a professional dancer. Dance students (particularly the younger ones) often take a long time to learn any new step or combination of steps. For instance, it is my habit to teach the footwork of any exercise before I teach the arm movements that accompany them⁴². No matter how proficient the students eventually become at the footwork, the addition of arms almost always throws them off balance (figuratively speaking). As a result of their inexperience and lack of true mastery of dance overall, their knowledge is fixed and at this stage is still not easily adaptable to new situations. As such they can only apply that knowledge when the situation is familiar to them. As they progress over the years, their ability to learn, absorb and adapt improves noticeably such that a professional dancer may only require a few minutes to learn any new sequence of steps⁴³.

Existing knowledge can also be applied to situations that are completely new and even foreign to the individual. A few years ago I decided to try Spanish dancing for the first time. At my first class, I knew as much about Spanish dance as any of the

⁴² Young children find it difficult to co-ordinate the desired arm and leg movements. At the start of the year when they are still learning their new work, my students often tell me they can do the arms or the legs but not the two together. Getting both to work together sometimes takes longer than it took to learn the exercise in the first place. Again this has to do with gaining the experience to adapt the conscious body to the will of our active thought. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we do not.

⁴³ One aspect of some ballet exams at higher levels include what is known as un-set exercises. Exam candidates are given verbal directions for a previously unseen exercise then allowed a few minutes practice before having to perform it for the examiner. The idea here is to test how quickly and how well each candidate is able to learn and perform new work, thus preparing them for one aspect of a professional career.

other women who began with me. However, as time progressed, it became apparent that my ballet training (and possibly even my long forgotten piano lessons) gave me an edge over the other students who had either no previous or limited dance training. Although we all struggled to learn this new way of moving arms and legs and having to play the castanets as well, the process in general was not quite as foreign to me as it was for the others. My previous dance training gave me a reference map for movement, albeit one that is not identical to Spanish dance, but nonetheless aiding in the learning process. Just the experience of having previously had to cultivate one form of dance and to constantly learn to assemble and assimilate different combinations of dance movement facilitated my attempt to learn this new form of dance.

The primacy of perception in lived experience

The learning process is also about the assimilation of an ideal or model into one's own way of being. This is apparent in dance in the teacher-student relationship, whereby the student perceives the teacher as a model from whom he/she learns dance movement. A class of dance students, for example, will copy the teacher's posture or movement as closely as possible. However, if one traces the progress of these students one will observe that while there may be a similarity among the students, each will also exhibit their own individual qualities. This individual quality lies with the unique, unrepeatable conscious body (of which the act of perception is a function) that is the student. The student's particular situation "primes" him/her to experience or perceive

the teacher-model in a manner that is unique to him/her, consequently developing a style that is his/hers alone.

In explaining this phenomena of perception, Merleau-Ponty declared the “primacy of perception”, whereby perception forms the basis of all our interactions with the world. Merleau-Ponty believed that “perception constitutes the ground level for all knowledge and that its study has to precede that of all other strata” (Spiegelberg, 1982:567). It not surprising therefore that, Merleau-Ponty calls for a “return to phenomena” (1962) in philosophical enquiry which will allow us to

“explore the basic stratum in our experience of the world as it is given prior to all scientific interpretation..... Hence the primary task is to see and to describe [and feel] how the world presents itself to perception as concretely as possible, without omitting its meanings and absences of meaning, its clarities and its ambiguities” (Spiegelberg, 1982, p.561).

This reliance on the phenomena of the perceived life-world rejects the value given to empirical data by scientific methods. Our perception is determined by our bodily engagement with our respective *social* worlds as well as our physical worlds. It is thus insufficient to account for our experiences using a purely empirical, physiological model of the body.

As mentioned earlier, Merleau-Ponty illustrates his point by citing examples of the “phantom limb” symptom where amputees often claim to still be able to “feel” the amputated limb. This experience would infer that we need to account for the experience of “existing in our bodies”. That is, a sense of being that is tied not simply to some empirical reality but more importantly to our sense of *experiential* reality

(what we think is real whether it is commonly recognised as real or not), a situation which requires the examination of our responses as psycho-somatic beings.

As we have already seen in our previous examination of the nature of consciousness, the response of an individual cannot be categorically divided into the purely physical and the purely mental. Similarly, the act of perception (being a faculty of the conscious body) cannot be said to be the function of purely physical or purely mental sensations of stimulation. Instead, while Merleau-Ponty might say that our capacity for perception is located in the body, we should note that it is the *conscious* body of which he is speaking. As O'Neill explains it,

“a phenomenological psychology rejects the subject-object dualism because it retrieves an ontological and epistemological unity prior to the disjunctions of natural science. The status of my body is privileged. I can never be detached from it, not even in the attitude of objectivity... My body is the vantage point from which I perceive all possible objects. It is my body which is the vehicle of my perception and movement in the world” (1970:14-15).

Thus, what I perceive, what I come to know of this world, comes from the vantage point of the conscious body. While I may, in all earnestness, try at objectivity, it is an objectivity that cannot be divorced from the presence of this person I am. For example, have you ever revisited a place or an object you had previously encountered as a child? It is often remarkable how places and objects we remember as being huge when we were children turn out to be quite ordinary, even small, to our adult selves. There is a great degree of relativity in lived perception that empirical thought tends either not to account for or discount as an aberration to the norm.

For that matter, this thesis is also the result of a question of perceptive differences I encountered a few years ago when enrolled in a course that studied the semiotics of art. While attempting to apply the principles of the course to what I knew of dance, I came to realise that my perception of dance was, for the most part, very different from that of most dance critics that I initially came across in my readings. Many of these critics liked to speak of the stage effects (e.g. lighting) and particularly the geometric figures or visual tensions created in the dance. While I may not find such concepts of dance so alien as not to comprehend them, I must say that such things are often not the first impressions or perceptions I have in viewing a dance. Instead, I would describe my response to dance as being more of a kinaesthetic sort of reaction, understanding or even empathy.

When I watch a dance performance, my immediate response to it stems from having experienced dance as a dancer. Moreover, the “view” one gets of any dance when actually involved in its execution is perceptually distinct from that of a person watching it. When in a dance, I do not see the overall geometric forms the dance makes as such. My view of it is both constrained to and enlarged by the intimate role, whether large or minor, in the performance. While I am unable to sit at a distance and take in the overall shape of the dance in its entirety (thus restricting my visual perception), as a dancer I am privy to a different kind of knowledge and experience from that of the audience (thus affording me an expanded perception of the *performance* of the dance). This is not to say that the perception of dance as geometric forms bearing some aesthetic meaning is invalid. It is simply a different point of view, a different means of understanding which is the result of a different lived experience. This is the point of Merleau-Ponty’s statement on the “primacy of perception” on two levels, the first being that

“the body is ‘primed’ to experience the world in a certain way. There is a ‘sedimented’ stock of knowledge. This stock of knowledge is not an innate structure: it accumulates with experience” (Hammond et al, 1991:189).

Hence the individual who has not shared my experiences would not be similarly “primed” to understanding things the way I do. This leads to the next point on the “primacy of perception”: that it is not what is perceived that is important, it is the *act* of perception that is under scrutiny here. This is typical of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that sees the self as a body of *motility* rather than one of materiality. He defines the “I” (and by extension the world) by its *actions* in the process of self-construction rather than some end result of the process. As such, it is not the final outcome which interests us but the processes of life, the processes which define and are the source of our life and its meaning. Once we recognise that what is perceived will always differ with each person, time and place, we come closer to understanding that which is of greater significance in phenomenological analysis: the nature of perception itself.

In trying to understand the nature of perception, Merleau-Ponty does not only examine the perceiver’s point of view but looks at the objects of our perception as well. He notes that empirical and transcendental philosophies believe in a true, absolute condition of things that is completely knowable and abstracted from the act of perception itself. He believes, however, that the thing itself tends to be, in a sense, created in the act of perception, created, that is, by and for the perceiver⁴⁴. Merleau-

⁴⁴ Hence the eternal Zen question of whether a tree which falls when there is no one to hear it actually makes a sound. Empirically speaking, you would have to say yes but in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, this notion of common sense begs to be questioned.

Ponty writes that “in space itself independently of the presence of a psycho-physical subject, there is no direction, no inside and no outside” (1962:204). Thus, for something to be perceived, it is the perceiver who must first assume a position in the “space” of the life-world. The subject functions like a compass that lends to the world a kind of direction and meaning not necessarily inherent in the world.

This may suggest that our life-world is composed of nothing more than illusory objects and images we draw from the depths of our imagination and give substance and form. Again, our experience tells us that there is an undeniable “thingness” of all objects, an “unchallengeable presence” (Hammond et al, 1991). It is this unchallengeable presence which lends to our life-world that element of apparent unchangeability that, in turn, gives our life-world a solidity or materiality not completely subject to our whims and desires⁴⁵. It is also this apparent unchangeability that empiricists mistakenly accept as an absolute truth, believing that all objects are entirely transparent at all times.

Coupled with its unchallengeable presence however is the ambiguity that is inherent to all objects. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a cube to illustrate this point. A cube is a three-dimensional object with six equally sized sides. Viewing it from one position cannot afford us a view of all its six sides. Even if the cube were made of glass, Merleau-Ponty observes, viewing the cube from just that one position would give the impression that the six sides are unevenly sized⁴⁶. It is only when we move around the cube that we gradually obtain a more complete impression of it. At no time during the process however do we see the cube in its totality. At every point,

⁴⁵ After all, if weight loss were a matter of desire, the general population would not be plagued by weight issues but would instead be whatever size or shape we desire.

⁴⁶ For most people, the fact that a cube is made of six equal sides is common knowledge, part of that experience of the world which we assimilate. Hence although the cube may appear to unevenly sized or have fewer than six sides from any one viewing point, we *know* that it is not the case.

an aspect of the cube's nature is always hidden from our immediate perception.

Hammond et al, state therefore that

“for any object, there are both future and past experiences that one cannot call on to enable one to ‘fix’ a thing with a determinate property. For a thing to have a determinate property there would have to be a completed synthesis, so that one would know that no more possible experiences were relevant to one's perception of the thing's having this particular determinate property” (1991:200).

There is always a sense of the possibility of there being something more or new to discover in any object. For one, simply viewing the cube only uses one of our perceptive abilities. When we apply our other sense, we invariably learn of a new aspect of the cube (e.g. if we touch it we might discover that its edges are sharp). Furthermore, if we were to examine that same cube in a month's time, we may again discover something else about the cube we did not sense or was not there before.

Objects also exist in a background we generally refer to as the world that, like the object, has an unchallengeable presence that transcends our capacity to experience it. This world is not simply a context within which the object appears; it is also that which points to what is both absent and present in the object. It is this world which functions as a directory that may influence which meanings we choose to give to the object. All things exist in a world that is the field of meanings that define what they and, ultimately, what we are. How else could we distinguish the cube from the rest of the world if there were not qualities found in the world at large that were absent in the cube (e.g. curved lines)? It is this aspect of the “background world” that also adds to the thing-ness, the unchallengeable presence of the object and vice versa. What the “primacy of perception” shows us is that while all objects possess quantifiable

elements or characteristics, their meanings (the essence of their significance in the world) is ultimately dependent on the perceiver.

Reversibility of the self

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty's begins his examination of the relationship between the "external" world and our "internal" one in the formation of self. This work, Merleau-Ponty's final and incomplete text, holds tantalising clues to a self that performs the dual role of perceiver and perceived in its relationship with itself. More importantly, it explores the complex and contradictory nature of this relationship and its implications for our perception of the phenomena that is the self. In describing the experience of self-perception, he tells us that

“when I touch my right hand with my left hand, the object right hand has the strange property of being able to feel too. We have just seen that the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands against one another, it is not then a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of ‘touching’ and ‘touched’” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:93).

As a result of the unfinished state of *The Visible and the Invisible* though, it is unclear how Merleau-Ponty planned to further develop the theories he had penned. Many of these thoughts remain undefined and much of what has been written about this text is mostly conjecture, based on his working notes.

Merleau-Ponty's theory of *reversibility* in the process of self-perception (or *alternation* as he initially referred to it in the *Phenomenology of Perception*) is

initially modelled on the sensation of touching and being touched, which he later expanded to incorporate other phenomenal experiences. It may first seem to us that perceiving and being perceived should be two very different experiences. Being perceived requires the perceived object to be intimately and inescapably present in the moment of perception. To perceive something, on the other hand, requires the perceiver to take a perceptual step back from the situation. For perception to occur, the perceiver must be able to distance or differentiate him/herself from the object of his/her attention. However, Merleau-Ponty observes that

“reversibility [is] always imminent and never realised in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence” (1968:147).

This non-coincidence is the effect of that distancing of the subject from its object. In terms of self-perception, my sense of “I” is de-centred. It is also this distancing or differentiation that is both what facilitates and *is* perception itself. As such, being able to perceive something is different from actually being that something (Dillon, 1989). In perception, the objectified part of “I” momentarily becomes somewhat less than “I” as we hold it within the proverbial “gaze” of the perceiver.

Despite the apparent gulf that separates the experience of being the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object, it is a simple matter for one hand to cease its exploration and for the other to take up its partner’s role. While we may distance ourselves in the moment of perception, are we not also undeniably present as the object of perception? Likewise (particularly when the two hands are palm to palm), where does one hand cease to be the perceiver and the other the perceived? Therefore,

“my seeing is continuous with my being seen; I could not be one without being the other, and there is no line of demarcation that can be drawn between the being of my body as subject and that of my body as object” (Dillon, 1989:90-91).

It is this reversibility⁴⁷ of roles between the perceiver and the perceived that forms the basis for the arguments presented in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Instead of being clearly defined experiences, touching and being touched share an ambiguous relationship and we cannot rightly draw that line which would distinguish one experience from another. Such ambiguity of experience, which is the focus of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of reversibility, prevents a fixed and clear definition of self, allowing external factors to influence its formation and definition.

Merleau-Ponty also observes that this role reversibility is a condition that is present not only in the act of self-perception but in all acts of perception. Where his discussion on self-perception centred on the experience of touch, Merleau-Ponty’s examination of our capacity to perceive “the other” focussed on the visual act (as indicated by the title of the text). The visible, like the tangible, is that which we can perceive physically via our sensory organs. The invisible, on the other hand, is that which we cannot readily perceive in the other, such as his/her thoughts. Merleau-Ponty argues that the visible (i.e. our body) serves as an object we can see as a common, physical link with the other that enables us both to perceive and be perceived. According to this theory,

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty went as far as to name the reversibility of perception as the “ultimate truth” in some of his last written words.

“my body, being seen by the Other, can reverse the roles and take up the Other’s vantage on itself. Here the Other functions as my mirror: he de-centres me, lets me see myself from another vantage” (Dillon, 1989:87).

As a point of argument, Merleau-Ponty raises the very existential (and Zen) question of whether a tree can in fact see us⁴⁸. This may seem a rather absurd point to pursue, but it does raise an important issue in the light of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the reversibility between perceiver and perceived.

For us to assume that our being able to see a tree would imply that the tree can in turn see us must seem like pure fantasy. After all, how could a tree possibly see? And yet without an “external” perspective (i.e. an other such as a tree) from which to view ourselves, self-perception becomes an impossible task. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty writes that

“he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it [flesh], unless, by principle, according to what is required by the articulation of the look with things, he is one of the visibles, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them – he who is one of them” (1968:134-135).

Thus, via the use of vision as imagery, Merleau-Ponty tells us that all objects (animate and inanimate) provide a visual standpoint, an “other” to which we can project and imbue with a consciousness. It is from this projected consciousness that we develop a sense of “I”, an “I” as opposed to “other”. Hence, perception

⁴⁸ He quotes, in *The Eye and the Mind*, comments from a painter as an instance of role reversal between the painter and the object he paints. “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who was looking at the forest, I felt, on certain days, that it was rather the trees that were looking at me” (Meder as cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1964:167).

is not only a means of identifying the other but a means of identifying our self as well⁴⁹.

All this appears contradictory to Merleau-Ponty's earlier statements, given that he has said that our consciousness is physical and refers to the entire, indivisible mind-body as the conscious body. How then can consciousness be projected into another corporeal form like some kind of astral visitation? Dillon insightfully addresses this conundrum when he writes,

“I see the other and the other sees me; but I do not experience my being seen as he does. A literal reversal of roles is impossible. Although looking presupposes being visible, seeing and being seen remain divergent, non-coincidental” (1989:96).

It is important to note, therefore, that while Merleau-Ponty proposes the reversibility of perception, he never suggests that this was a symmetrical relationship. That is, that a tree could perceive exactly as I do or that I could ever experience how it perceives me. Instead, this concept of a projected consciousness is more of a functional tool, a way of “escaping” the self so as to see the self.

However, Merleau-Ponty's theory of reversibility does more than just allow us to see ourselves. The reversibility of the self also allows us to acknowledge and connect with another consciousness. Reversibility also explains the nature of our engagement with the external world and the things and bodies that inhabit it through a sense of shared experiences and perspectives. As Merleau-Ponty notes,

⁴⁹ Similar concepts are also found in Althusser's discussion of interpellation (1998) and Bakhtin's theory of self (1993).

“the factual presence of other bodies could not produce thought or the idea if its seed were not in my own body. Thought is a relationship with oneself and with the world as well as a relationship with the other” (1968:145).

The experience of being able to have a perspective from a vantage point other than the self allows us to assume, however briefly and superficially, the consciousness of the other. That we can “see” from outside the conscious body is both a consequence of having a conscious body and being able to “shift” to other bodies, other things, around us. As a result, the world around us, the things and the bodies that populate it function like mirrors, reflecting images back onto us, showing us both who we are, who we are not and who we hope to be.

But a reflected image is not real for if we were to break the mirror, the image would no longer exist. Similarly, if we were to step away from the mirror, our reflection would disappear. Thus, assuming the vantage point of an “other” is not the same as being that other. It is a borrowed consciousness that often projects certain expectations and desires that we may have about the other. For instance, a performer who plays Madame Mao Zedong on stage is not actually Madame Mao. Instead, the character presented comes from the performer’s understanding of the historical person that is subsequently interpreted for the audience. Likewise, having danced on stage, I may empathise with the dancer performing before me, but I am not her and can only project my experience of dancing onto my experience of her performance (i.e. my interpretation or appreciation of her performance).

Reflections are therefore a projection of consciousness, what I think, hope and expect to see, whose existence or manifestation is based on the interchange between two or more objects. They are momentary, fleeting things that come into existence in the moment of engagement and then, they are no more. At the same time, these

“reflections” are very real and meaningful to us. They have an existence, however brief, in that moment of perception when the perceiver “grasps” hold of the perceived and the engagement becomes real. And so, Merleau-Ponty points to a crucial point in his theory of reversibility:

“there is a vision, touch, when a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact” (1968:139).

The image in the mirror belongs neither to the mirror nor to myself. It is both me and at the same time (because I perceive it) not me. It is something in between, something between the tangible and the intangible, the visible and the invisible⁵⁰. Similarly, in the staging of a performance, the interpretation or meaning of the performance is not the sole domain of the text, performer, director or audience. Instead, each party must engage with what is before him/her, and through this engagement come to an understanding or interpretation that is a shared project that cannot be (or is something different) without any one person. It is, therefore, this “thing” we create in engagement, in the moment of perception, that Merleau-Ponty names *flesh*.

As the theory of reversibility emerges in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty moves away from the simpler notion of body to the more complex one of flesh. He replaces our understanding of the conscious self or body with the notion of flesh as “an ‘element’ of being” (1968) and tells us that

⁵⁰The concept here is similar to that of liminality, defined by Turner as “the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (1967:97).

“we must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be the union of contradictories – but we must think it... as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:147).

Flesh, he says, is not a passive state we arrive at or are born into. Rather, flesh is born of that reversibility between the perceiver and the perceived, in an exchange that always turns back on itself. Moreover, since reversibility is “always imminent and never realised” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:147), the flesh is similarly “always in the process of an unfinished incarnation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:209-10). Flesh is not only the folding of the self onto itself (as in self-perception); it is also the folding of all perception onto the perceiver.

In this sense, we are as much of the world as we are of ourselves. As such, “the autonomous ‘person’ does not exist: I am being at depths never reaching final resolution, never reaching a ‘oneness’” (Mazis, 1989:262-263). We are not separate from the world and its objects. As we give meaning to the world via our engagement with it, it too makes us meaningful⁵¹. Things exist for us because we can perceive them and perceive how different and similar they are to us and we, in turn, exist because our interaction with the world at large confirms our living. At a more complex level, our flesh, while having an undeniable presence of corporeality, is transformed in its engagement with objects, other flesh and values of the world we live in to form more flesh. For instance, although classical ballet today idealises a certain type of body for women, this ideal has not always been historically consistent. Up to the forties, there really was no preferred body type although years of training

⁵¹ After all, what meaning does being alive and sentient have if we do not know what being non-sentient is?

did give dancers elongated muscles that provide strength while maintaining a slim figure. It is interesting therefore to note that the preference shown by Balanchine (one of the twentieth century's most successful choreographers) for lean, athletic and long legged ballerinas led to a certain revolution in the perception of what kind of body was most ideal for ballet. This in turn led to the change in which ballet technique is conceptualised, perceived and performed, with legs (that once were decorously held at ninety degrees or lower) now lifting upwards of a ninety degree angle to the body; this being one of the standard abilities of a person desiring a professional career. Flesh therefore, is a complex notion that is ever becoming and changing and shaping.

Our flesh is not only a product of our interaction with the world; it is also the medium for that interaction. As Merleau-Ponty sees it, our flesh gives us access to the flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty equates having flesh with having a presence in the world, referring to it as “the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh” (1968:135). Moreover, our corporeality, our sense of having and being a body, gives us the means to act and engage with the world at large. Flesh is also the commonality that facilitates our communication. As Grosz puts it,

“the flesh is that elementary, precommunicative domain out of which both subject and object, in their mutual interactions, develop... It is the chiasm linking and separating the one from the other, the ‘pure difference’ whose play generates persons, things, and their separations and unions” (1994, 102-103).

However, our engagement with the world is not a one-sided relationship where “I” as the primary origin of “my world” is in control of my surroundings. In folding back on itself in the course of perception, a new self is also formed. This is the intertwining

relationship between perceiver and perceived, self and itself and self and the world. As such, in the act of perception, flesh is both *originale* and *originaire* of perception, for even as we act on the world, the world (or, rather, our perception of it) acts on us as well.

We and our world are created and re-created in every engagement of perception, with the flesh reaching fulfilment for the briefest moment before new flesh is born. In explaining this unique phenomena of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty writes that

“each sensation, being strictly speaking, the first, last and only one of its kind, is a birth and a death. The subject who experiences it begins and ends with it, and as he can neither precede nor survive himself, sensation necessarily appears to itself in a setting of generality, its origin is anterior to myself, it arises from sensibility which has preceded it and which will outlive it” (1962:216).

Again I return to the metaphor of a mirror whereby “I”, in the process of perception or in my intertwining with the world (i.e. mirror), engage with my image and allow it to change me even as I change it. When I see my image in the mirror, I may perceive something I then proceed to change, such as a stray lock of hair on my face. As I act on myself, the image in the mirror changes too. Repeated *adindefinitum*, this is the process of perception and, subsequently, the way we engage with the world, allowing our sense of self to intertwine with its flesh, values and physical presence.

The flesh, therefore, is mutable from moment to moment and must be regarded in spatio-temporal terms. It must be understood as a moving, acting force. For “it is not the ‘states’, simple snapshots we have taken once along the course of change, that are real; on the contrary, it is flux, the continuity of transition, it is change itself that is

real” (Bergson, 1968:16). Our experience of being is largely one of becoming, of constantly evolving toward (whatever⁵²). And so, we are not so much located in space and time as we are a part of it (and it of us). We are spatial and temporal beings, and, as Mazis observes, it is, for Merleau-Ponty, “essential to see that the body *is* space and not *of* space” (1989:252). Merleau-Ponty’s position on the body of space and time becomes clearer when one analyses performance arts such as dance.

Embodiment and flesh in the context of dance

For example, I first thought of this thesis when attempting a semiotic analysis of a dance performance. At the time, I felt that the particular, visually based, semiotic approach I was taking excluded my view of the meaning of dance as a dancer. Although it is an entirely valid viewpoint to sit at a distance (as a member of the audience) and watch the significance of the visual patterns unfold in the dance⁵³, it must be acknowledged that a dancer’s place in a dance affords him/her a different perspective to the spatial and temporal aspects of the performance. Just like my touching my own hand is a different perceptive experience to that of touching someone else’s hand, both the audience and the dancer have experiences that are valid and important to our understanding of the self as it encounters and engages with itself and the world.

A hallmark of traditional ballets is the symmetry of the patterns created by the collective of moving bodies. Sitting in the audience, one can see the symmetry of the geometric shapes formed by both the *corps de ballet* and the individual dancer. The perspective of the dance audience comes from a predominantly visual experience. Ballet, as a theatre art, is targeted at an audience who *watch*; thus giving rise to its

⁵²Deleuze (1990) talks about becoming as the way in which the world is rather than how it is something.

⁵³ Particularly since ballets are by tradition designed for a viewing audience, unlike social dance forms.

highly visual nature. Hence, as an audience, our sense of space and time in dance is often limited to that visual perspective. The primary engagement of perception between the audience and the performer is one of seeing and being seen. When I am on stage, however, the experience of dance is not solely or even exclusively a visual engagement. For the dancer, space and time are not wholly a visual element. Both have, instead, a kinaesthetic quality (among others) that dancers seek to refine as part of the development of their technique and, subsequently, their sense of being as dancer⁵⁴.

A dance student often spends a lot of time in front of the mirror; first with a teacher helping to make visual corrections and, later, making these corrections on his/her own. As we cannot always see what our body is doing, mirrors initially play an important role in helping the dancer arrange him/herself in an aesthetically pleasing line. The process of watching oneself in the mirror is one of objectification. We assume this other (i.e. audience) viewpoint with the aim of internalising the object in the mirror so that it becomes our way of being. Fraleigh observes that, “the dance is distanced from me as an object when I visualise it or seek to convert it into my own movement. The object dissolves when I achieve my intentions in motion” (1987:37). When intent is one with motion, I no longer require a mirror to know if I am properly aligned. Nor do I need to construct an image in my mind, or to pause to reflect to be aware of what my body is doing. This is the consciousness of the body; the consciousness of the self in function. I am conscious (without being aware of it) that my leg is not sufficiently turned out or that my foot is stretched to its fullest. Likewise, I need not *look* to know if I am in the right place in the dance; I have a kinaesthetic sense of it.

⁵⁴ In my second chapter, I will also explain how energy is exchanged between audience and performer and how this energy is part of the kinaesthetic quality that is experienced in a physical (visual, tactile) and psychological (aesthetic, emotional) sense.

When I am dancing, time is also no longer counted in the empirical terms of minutes and seconds. Instead, one second can appear longer than another if the expressive content of the music or movement requires it. Dancing strictly to the discernible counts of the music (i.e. 1,2,3...) is like speaking in a monotone. While speaking with inflection of tone may take up the same amount of quantifiable time, it creates a different life and expression in the speech and thus makes time appear longer or shorter. A dancer performing a movement such as a *grand jete*, can also “suspend” at the maximum height of the jump, creating the illusion of time suspension even as the second hand of the clock ticks on. Likewise, for a dancer, a dance may pass in what seems like seconds although it may actually run for several minutes (or vice versa). Consequently, while time has empirical value, our *experience* of it is less easily quantifiable and subject to the variations that we or the things around us, bring to it.

Thus, space and time are not so much objects or tools we use to express ourselves; rather, space and time are extensions of our consciousness and (particularly in relation to movement) are not divisible from us. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty notes that

“the body is essentially an expressive space. If I want to take hold of an object, already, at a point in space about which I have been quite unmindful, this power of grasping constituted by my hand moves upwards towards the thing. I move my legs not as things in space two and a half feet from my head, but as a power of locomotion which extends my motor intention downwards” (1962:146).

As a dancer, I exercise a degree of self-determination over my movements: when, where and how I shall move. Although things (be they social conventions or actual

physical objects) may stand in my way, I can choose to work with or around them or to set them aside completely. In this sense, we can agree with Merleau-Ponty's statement that "movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them" (1962:102). However, while I am at liberty to play with these conventions and objects, I am not entirely free of them.

For instance, it is an accepted practice for the *flamenco* dancer to increase or slow the pace of the dance or to alter steps to suit him/herself. However, all movements are required to remain in *compás*⁵⁵, with sufficient indication of one's intentions to the accompanying guitarist. Moreover, if a singer is present, etiquette requires that the dancer's pace follows that of the singer. Hence, neither the stage nor the life-world is a place empty of things that may pre-dispose me to think or act in a certain way; for or against the grain. While I may not passively submit to space and time, my actions are nonetheless governed by the particularities of specific spaces and specific times. As such, space and time is bordered by, and filled with, the presence of Others (both material and imagined) as well as social, cultural, physical and historical precedents through and around which my movements navigate. Where I am on stage during a dance is situated in relation not to the stage entire, but to the other dancers who surround me, other supporting artists or to the stage of the dance at a particular moment. It involves not just my sense of sight, but all my senses to know where I am, or should be, in that moment of the dance.

To examine the experience and feel of a dance based on the contents of its visual semiotics is to limit our understanding of it, particularly when one considers those dances which are performed primarily for the performers themselves rather than an audience⁵⁶. Therefore, to only see a still photograph of a part of a dance is to lose

⁵⁵ Beat or rhythm.

⁵⁶ As are most social dances.

the essence of its moment: that is, movement. It is for this reason that Hammond, Howarth and Keat quite aptly observe that

“the reality of a thing increases when it is perceived by more senses. If one perceives an object with only one sense, it may appear less real than if one could perceive that same object with more senses. The unity and the reality of the thing perceived are only fully appreciated when the senses are acting in unison” (1991:195).

When we look at a thing its texture also affects our perception of its colour. If we were to examine two pieces of cloth in the same shade of blue but of different kinds of fabric (e.g. wool and cotton) we may describe one as a soft blue and the other as a crisp shade of blue. Similarly, as an audience, we are situated “outside” of the dance watching and are not essentially of its weave. But even as an audience, held immobile in our seats by our conventional role, our bodies respond to the movement of the dance; we may imagine (for instance) that we are in fact one of the performers on stage, living vicariously through them. Therefore, the problem with relying solely on a visual semiotics is that it limits our experience and tries to separate vision from and advance it above all our other senses.

Being a body of specific spaces and specific times, one can also conclude that flesh is a phenomenon that is unique to each individual’s lived experience. While Merleau-Ponty speaks of flesh as a shared experience of our humanity, there are only ever brief hints in all his texts about the specificity of flesh. This is certainly a failing in his argument with which feminists like Irigaray (1984), Butler (1990), Young (1990) and Grosz (1994) take issue, particularly when discussing *The Visible and the Invisible*. For them, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the lived experience, particularly

that of sexuality, stems from (and therefore uses) metaphors that are essentially based on a phallogentric point of view; particularly in the way in privileged position he gives to vision (traditionally associated with phallogentrism) in his work (Grosz, 1994).

While the argument for the gendered body is certainly valid, one must acknowledge that the body is not only gendered but has a multitude of social labels which can be applied to it such as race, class, country, occupation, age. As Fraleigh writes,

“I am limited by being this particular body, which is mine and mine alone, with its intricacies and individuated form and sensitivities. Whether I like it or not, my particular embodiment and my images of its powers and limitations condition my general comportment in life” (1987:17).

To this end, it should suffice to say that my flesh is specific. My lived experiences and perspectives are unique to me, as are everyone else’s unique to them. It is for this reason (the specificity of flesh) that phenomenological research is important in exploring the concept of self, since it allows for the singularity of individual positions. This is what Merleau-Ponty fails to express often and clearly enough, perhaps believing that the fundamental theory of the phenomenological project was sufficient explanation. In his writings he assumes the universality of flesh and that the experience of this essence of being exists for all objects in the world. What is unclear is that this universality is also perceptual. After all, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project is based on the primacy of perception, but in the theorising that occurs between this and the final statement, what is often forgotten is that it *is* based on the perception of the *individual*.

However, through phenomenology, we also find a way between the particularity of the “I” and the generality of the “we”. In our examination of shared media of performance (such as dance), we see that the ambiguity between the “I” of the individual performer and the “I” of the role he/she plays creates

“a complex referentiality, where the personal is at the same time the collective and where the account of individual experience becomes – in the midst of its particularity – a shared expression” (Garner, 1994:214).

As such, my participation in collective discourses, while being a lived experience specific to me, also enables my participation in and adoption of a collective identity; be it a role I play onstage or a role I play in life. Thus, it is because I perceive some of my experiences to overlap with the experiences of others (e.g. having a physical body, being a woman, being a dancer), that I presume that they may also share my perspectives (thus making them similar to me) or that they have any perspective at all, even though it may be a differing one (thus making them different from me).

The twist in Merleau-Ponty’s Möbius strip of phenomenological theory of the individual and perception lies in its belief in the reversibility of perception. Indeed, reversibility reduces what some may call the solipsist tendencies of phenomenology: in other words, the argument that we are discrete from the world. Instead, we are all changed by the external world, thus removing the possibility of a discrete, autonomous self. Although our skin, our corporeal body, provides that very real barrier and sense that we are separate from the outside world, we are nonetheless drawn to and defined by that world nonetheless.

It is also important to note that there is a porous quality to this barrier in both a perceptual and physical sense. For example, the skin is able to both excrete and

absorb various substances. Clothing, which is a group of clearly external objects when hanging from a rack, becomes an extension of our physical sense of self when worn. A ballet dancer's *pointe* shoes too are as much a part of her body as her feet and legs; in the sense of an integration or joining with such external objects facilitate a dancer's performance of self⁵⁷. Thus, as the lyrics of the song, *Colourblind*, eloquently state,

“I am covered in skin
No one gets to come in
Pull me out from inside
I am folded and unfolded
And unfolding I am colourblind”
(Duritz, 1999)

No one may get to see the inside of me, but the inside and outside blend like the two sides of a Möbius strip into one entity. As much as our bodies may be an inescapable part of our humanity, our *being-in-the-world* is also an aspect of that humanity. Thus, to have a relationship with the external world is to open up our selves to it. We exist between the universalised and specific, sharing common aspects with the world around us, but still retaining a separate identity.

Phenomenology opens the way to articulating perception as the most basic of human engagement with the world. It is not a statement *on* perception but a statement *about* or *from* perception. It does not tell us what *is* (i.e. an absolute truth); it is a description of what *I* perceive things to be. It gives us access to the other point of view without having to enter into arguments regarding its absolute validity. I would

⁵⁷ Dancers (other theatrical performers and sports people as well) are generally quite particular about the kinds of footwear they use when dancing as it is such an integral part of the process.

suggest too that its descriptions of the mechanisms of perception are also subjective and therefore open for discussion.

The phenomenological project therefore should not be read as a finite statement of the lived experience. This is, after all, where previous theories of self have failed. We are so used to being sold all knowledge as propositional truth that both phenomenologists and their critics forget the fundamental principles of this philosophy and consequently fail to emphasise the point that that phenomenological descriptions are not this kind of truth and are not meant to be such. Phenomenology offers us a different way of understanding our life experiences; one based both on the specificity of the individual and our connection with the universe (i.e. universal aspects of our experience), and should not be understood to do any more. It is an attempt at creating a philosophy that accounts for the diversity of individual lived experiences and the development of identity and place in a socio-historical context, which (within the context of becoming a dancer) is what I am attempting to explore in this thesis. In the following chapter, an exploration of Buddhist philosophies of *self-cultivation* as a means of understanding this development of identity will provide a possible foundation from which to explore the relationship between the contextual formation of the self and collective identities.

Becoming: A Buddhist Concept of Self

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of and contribution to phenomenology opens new insight into the self as a physical consciousness with both spatial and temporal qualities. His work on perception and, particularly, on the reversibility of perception theorises the interaction between self and itself as well as self and its environment. Moreover his analysis of medical case studies provides us with a site for grounding the ideas he proposes. Despite its basis in the lived perception of self however, Merleau-Ponty's work generally remains an academic exercise performed on reflection on (rather than in conjunction with) an act. It is an analytic tool applied by those who support the philosophy of phenomenology as a means of giving word to experience. It is this, however, which presents as phenomenology's main weakness as a philosophy of the lived self.

The overt development of philosophy as an experiential realisation is not a common practice in academic circles. Experience-based philosophies such as phenomenology generally rely on observation and reflection as tools of theorisation. The alternative to this, as offered by some Eastern philosophies, would be a theoretical realisation that emerges simultaneously with experience, particularly through the practice of meditation. Such Eastern philosophies are being increasingly compared and coupled with the phenomenological movement, with studies on Buddhism emerging at the forefront of these comparative analyses. Buddhist philosophy, particularly as it is practised in Japanese culture, serves as a unique counterpart to phenomenology as it is a practice of philosophy that is not constrained to an academic environment. Instead, the philosophy of Buddhism permeates the practice of Japanese religious (e.g. Zen), social (e.g. tea ceremony), physical (e.g.

martial arts) and artistic (e.g. Nō) life as well. Studies on Buddhism have shown that it can, alongside phenomenology, contribute much to developing an effective philosophy on the self as the conscious body, as well as an understanding of how this self is formed through social and cultural body techniques such as dance.

Self as function and practice

In approaching a study of Buddhist philosophy however, it would be erroneous to believe or purport that there exists in Buddhism just one theory or concept of self or, for that matter, one approach towards the realisation of the “enlightened self”. For the purpose of this thesis, my main interest lies with a Zen Buddhist⁵⁸ understanding of self⁵⁹, since it has much influence on the performance theory developed by Zeami⁶⁰ as well as other Japanese attitudes toward self, society and the arts. While there may be varying views as to the exact nature of the self, it can be said that there exists, in the Buddhist tradition, a general understanding of self as an interdependent system; a concept that is radically different from much of Western philosophy of self (particularly Cartesian philosophy).

Buddhism is consistent with Cartesian dualism only to the extent that it agrees that there are two distinguishable phenomena, the physical and the mental⁶¹. Unlike its Cartesian counterpart, Buddhism acknowledges that though mind-function and body-function are different experiential qualities, they are nonetheless inseparable parts of the same system. For the Cartesian dualism that influences much of Western philosophy however, it is the polarity or differences between the two that forms the

⁵⁸ Zen philosophy is a derivative of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition most commonly practised in Japan.

⁵⁹ Even within Zen Buddhism there exist variations on the concept of self.

⁶⁰ A Nō master whose work I will discuss later in this chapter.

⁶¹ The five aggregates or *skandhas* (as I will explain in greater detail later) describe experiences which are both mental and physical. Hence, while Buddhist philosophy acknowledges a difference between mental and physical qualities, there is no clear distinction between the two in the course of our actual experience.

ontological point for the theorisation of the self. Consequently, it makes the assumption that the condition of each phenomenon is separate and thus cannot be significantly affected or altered by a change in or the departure of the other.

Although Cartesian theorists have long grappled with the conundrum of dualism and the ultimate origin of the self, Zen philosophers do not perceive a conflict in the concept of the duality or indeed, the multiplicity of the self and its point of origin. Instead, they maintain that while “body and mind may be conceptually distinguishable from some perspectives, they are not assumed to be ontologically distinct” (Kasulis, 1987:1). Thus, the mind-body or psychophysical complex of Buddhist theory is centred on the view that the mind and body have an internal and symbiotic relationship in which the existence of each depends on the other and the disappearance of one changes the character of the other.

Perhaps one reason why Zen Buddhism does not trouble itself with such questions as to where the self, its mind-aspect or its body-aspect, originates from is that it perceives such questions to be irrelevant to the lived experience of self since they are subject to speculation and hence unanswerable⁶². Instead, they seem more preoccupied with the exploration of the self’s *function*, the self in action or practice rather than in theory, and in defining the self in terms of what it does and how it becomes rather than what it is. As Bancroft notes, “the Zen way of teaching is to demonstrate Reality rather than talk about it” (1979:7). For the purpose of clarity in this paper, however, I will attempt to put into words as close a definition of the self as possible, according to traditional Buddhist teachings.

Generally speaking, most Cartesian and Buddhist theorists agree that *body* refers to our physical, material form and functions (sense perception, motor operation)

⁶²Unlike Merleau-Ponty and other Western philosophers whose philosophies of the self do devote considerable energies to the examination of the ontology of self.

and that *mind* refers to our intellectual processes (capacity for abstraction, imagination). The self is not only far more difficult to define, but also quite differently defined by Buddhism and Cartesian philosophy. Definitions of self are more commonly found in early Buddhist texts such as the *Abhidharma*. In these texts, the self is deconstructed into five *skhandas*⁶³: *rupa*, *vedana*, *samjna*, *samskara* and *vijnana*. The first and last *skhandas* most closely resemble the traditional Cartesian division of the self into body and mind. *Rupa* refers to our physical form, in particular the sense organs, although it must also be added here that Buddhist theory includes the brain as a sixth sense organ. *Vijnana* is our consciousness or intellectual/mental process. In between are three *skhandas* that describe experiences that fall between the *rupa* and *vijnana skhandas*. The *vedana skhanda* describes our sensations or feelings, both physical and emotional, which arise as a result of the contact between the sense organ and an external object or stimuli. *Samjna* refers to perception and reaction in relation to external objects or stimuli. *Samskara* is our mental constructs that include volitions and creative acts as responses to these external objects or stimuli.

All the *skhandas* are inter-linked and related to each other. The sense organs are not simply sensory organs but organs possessing their own consciousness. As Xuanzhang observes,

“Buddhism explains sensory consciousness as the contact between a sense organ and a sensory ‘element’. The ‘element’ is the physical medium which sensory organ detects (e.g. the eye detects light, the ear sound, the nose chemicals in the air, etc). This contact produces the sensory consciousness of sensation” (1998, [online]).

⁶³*Skhanda* means heap or bundle which suggests that each *skhanda* can be further deconstructed.

By this argument, consciousness is not an attribute that belongs solely to the brain. Instead, Buddhist philosophy, like Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology, holds that the mind-self and body-self function together as the conscious self. Thus, there is consciousness in every cell of our body, giving rise to visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, gustatory consciousness, tactile consciousness and mental consciousness.

From the *skhanda* theory we see that the focus of traditional Buddhist philosophy is on the definition and description of the self in terms of its experiences and the relation of the self with the external world. In fact, it is said that

“at his enlightenment Gautama saw himself and all life as a vast process, an ever-moving stream of becomings and extinctions, and within this ever-moving flow and interpenetration of energies he recognised as delusion the idea of existence of an individual ego. What we have taken for the ‘self’ was actually a composite of various aggregates, a series of psychophysical reactions and responses with no fixed centre or unchanging ego-entity” (Ross, 1981, p.20).

As such, it is our experience of self in the world that projects a self or sense of self⁶⁴ to an external world and this self or sense of self comes only into being in the moment of experiencing and does not exist before that moment. Where the Cartesian self is a discrete unit that acts upon or is acted on (i.e. either subject or object), the Buddhist self is the self in action and reaction, continually being re-created by its actions. As a result, the distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity are blurred in Buddhism. This blurring of the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is akin to the sense of self we derive as a performer. When in a performance, I am both myself as a

⁶⁴ That is, who we are or who we think we are.

dancer as well as the character that I assume for the purpose of the performance. I experience myself as subject, but I also experience myself as object; as what the audience expects and sees.

Buddhists consequently define the self as a performance, a way of acting as opposed to a state of being. Moreover this being is not a discrete, self-contained entity but relies instead on its continual interaction, activity and function as a means for self-definition and self-perpetuation. Like Merleau-Ponty, Buddhism agrees that any sense of self or ego we may possess is just that, a *sense* of self: a product and function of the *samskara* as opposed to some empirical being or pre-condition to our existence.

Buddhist theory (unlike Cartesian philosophy⁶⁵) also maintains that while the self is the sum of the *skhandas* (and possibly more than that), none of these can (on its own) be said to wholly constitute or be the self, and also that there is nothing beyond that self⁶⁶. Consequently, the *Abhidharma* also states that the *skhandas* and therefore the self are “empty”⁶⁷. It is this theory of emptiness, groundlessness and “no self” that is the most perplexing of all Buddhist concepts of self to conventional Cartesian thinking.

Buddhism believes that the sense of permanence is a falsehood, a false attachment that, through cultivation or meditation, we strive to rid ourselves of in order to attain enlightenment. In its own theory of perception, Buddhism (like Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology) teaches that it is not what we perceive that makes things real for us. Instead, it is the act of perception itself that makes things real for us. However, while Merleau-Ponty talks about the impermanence of perception as a way of rationalising our lived experience and understanding how the material world

⁶⁵ Traditional Cartesian based philosophy of the self has generally been dominated by the debate over the ontological origins of the self, whether it is determined by our body-aspect or mind-aspect.

⁶⁶ That is, there is no superior being we can aspire to other than what we already are and can make of it.

⁶⁷ Empty in the sense that there is no permanent substance or essence which we can or should hold on to or name

interacts with our consciousness, Buddhism turns impermanence into a discourse on how we should actually live our lives. As Sarachandra explains,

“the world of constant change has no permanent reality. Its existence is purely relative, and is dependent on the activities of the senses. It is expressly stated that what the Buddhists mean by the world is that consciousness of external things which people gain through the sense organs.” (1994:11).

Buddhism teaches therefore that the belief that there is an external objective world or reality simultaneous with and independent to our selves constructs an equally false notion of a separate subjective “I”. That is not to say that the external world is a construct of the human mind, but rather that Buddhism does not acknowledge the existence of an external world which is independent of our awareness of it.

This is a major point where Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism diverge, though the reason for this divergence can probably be explained when one considers the differing purposes of Buddhism and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of phenomenology and the nature of the cultures from which they emerged⁶⁸. While it appears that the lived experience (the world as we live and experience it) has no significance in Buddhist philosophy, such a position (when taken from a different perspective) actually helps us to see the cultural positioning of body cultivation techniques. For instance, Sarachandra explains that,

⁶⁸Buddhism is essentially a guide to living one’s life in a spiritual manner. It emerged and developed in societies that gave importance to community life and understanding over individuality. Merleau-Ponty however was an intellectual trying to make sense of the way we experience the world as individuals. Hence, it is not surprising that he gives primacy to the kind of individual experiences that Buddhism cautions as being a source of discontent.

“as far as the individual is concerned, therefore, he should aim at putting an end to the pursuit of knowledge by way of the senses, and strive at the attainment of a more stable happiness... He destroys empirical consciousness and develops, by inward meditation, certain indefinable subjective states which will bring him peace of mind” (1994:12).

Therefore, while the Buddhist philosophy of the self talks about an embodied mind, it does not encourage living one’s life solely on the basis of our senses or physiology. There is a tendency in modern life to base human worth and happiness wholly on an overindulgent relationship with our corporeality. This trend often manifests itself in two ways: either we allow our fate to be determined by the kind of bodies we have (e.g. because we do not have a conventionally attractive body we are doomed to social rejection) or we seek to determine the course of our lives by actively altering and changing those aspects of our bodies which we deem unacceptable (e.g. via plastic surgery).

Among classical ballet dancers, particularly students, this way of thinking is not uncommon. Students without the “ideal” physique often feel (or are made to feel through the conventional image of the ballerina or the seeming ease with which their more physically fortunate peers move) inferior to the more physically gifted students. These unfortunate students can then resign themselves to being inferior dancers or take their destiny into their own hands by such actions as starving themselves into the desired sylph-like proportions.

Such “perfection” however, tends to be a cultural construct that does not necessarily relate to one’s abilities and success as a dancer. The reality is that individuals with the desired long limbs or extreme flexibility often find that dance can be difficult because their long legs make quick movements difficult and that

flexibility is often accompanied by a lack of strength⁶⁹. Sylvie Guillem (who is generally regarded as having the most “perfect” ballet body) is considered something of a freak. In fact, the uniqueness of her physique led one critic to comment that

“with mademoiselle Guillem, one sees, constantly, her need to impose herself physically upon the role. To let people know that it is she, Sylvie Guillem, and not anyone else. It is a matter of those extraordinary extensions, the legs zip past the ear, which [is] quite unnecessary and sometimes wrong for the choreography” (Crisp as interviewed in Wattis, 1993).

As such, great dance and great dancers are thus not only about having the right body⁷⁰. More often, it is more about projecting a certain culturally appropriate and accepted image or way of being which consists of more than one’s physical attributes. To the critic, Crisp, Sylvie Guillem was limited as a dancer because she felt that the audience did not see the tragic character of Juliet (for instance) on stage when they watched Guillem dance the role. This defeated her purpose as a dancer, which was to play the role so convincingly, we forget there is a person called Sylvie Guillem dancing before us and who we see instead is Juliet.

Cultivating the self in its impermanence

From the Buddhist perspective, who we are and what we do does not depend on only one aspect of our existence. Instead, who we are is about fulfilling our potential and making the most out of what we are given. While our corporeal

⁶⁹ A colleague commenting on the highly arched feet of one student described them as being “beautiful but quite useless”.

⁷⁰ Sylvie Guillem says in an interview: “I am not like this just because it’s a gift. I was lucky to have gift, I admit, but I worked a lot and this is difficult for everybody, to work.... It’s all so easy to stop where you are and just use the gift you have. Doesn’t give good things at the end. You must use all of that, its ingredient” (as interviewed in Wattis, 1993).

existence is an important part of who we are, it is not the only part. Focussing only on the state of our bodies as a meter for our lives is therefore misleading, particularly since the body and ideas about the body change with different times, culture and contexts. In this sense, Buddhism's "emptying of one's ego" (like phenomenology's *epoche*) actually points to the fact that ideas of the self are socio-cultural constructs and should be understood as such in order to gain more understanding of how the self is developed.

Zen Buddhism's understanding of self is based on the lived experience (*taiken*) of being a self-in-the-world. This belief is fuelled by the basic Zen principle that the "now-ness" or momentariness of experience is all there is and even that is in itself empty so to cling to such an experience is a falsehood. Hence, the concept of lived experience forms the pivotal point to understanding, knowledge and enlightenment in Buddhism as we have already seen that it does for Merleau-Ponty.

The realisation of the self-in-the world and its momentariness is the key in Zen cultivation practices towards enlightenment. As Shaner explains, "enlightenment is not some other-worldly truth to be grasped via a mystical experience. Rather, it involves a keen awareness of that which is already present" (1985:75). In our case, that which is already present is our corporeal body, possessed of consciousness and situated in a world composed of cultural and physical elements. As a result, Zen cultivation centres on the body in an effort to unify thought and action; that is, to bring together the moment of action with the moment of realisation as opposed to reflection and retrospection as enlightening processes. As Izutsu observes,

"Zen proposes to grasp Man directly as an absolute selfhood prior to his being objectified into a 'thing'. Only then, it maintains, can we hope to obtain a true

image of Man representing him as he really is, that is, in his real, immediate ‘is-ness’” (1977:4).

This is a vital concept in understanding and cultivating the relationship between the performer (i.e. self) and the performance (i.e. of self). Retrospection is not something a performer can afford while in the midst of a performance, and any reflection will more likely occur in a later, private moment to which the audience is not privy. Even if they were privy to that moment, it would be removed from the instance of performance and thus have lost its effect. As Bancroft (rather poetically) notes,

“the numinous quality of the experience – in which the *radiance* of the world is revealed as never before – transforms ordinary subject-object duality into a new dimension of being, so that there appears to be an absence of self or ‘I’ for as long as the experience lasts” (1979:10).

Thus, there is a momentariness about performance, indeed about all life, which comes and goes in an instant. Although some may argue that it can, today, be captured on film and replayed over again, performance involves far more than simply the actions of the performer. This is the point established by the *skhanda* theory of the self. Each aggregate of the self does not exist on its own. One is nothing without the others and the individual *skhanda* cannot be identified as the ontological origin of the self. As the *skhandas* form a cohesive and interdependent system, so too do the performer, the audience, the setting, the medium (theatre, film), the time, and countless other aggregates contributing toward each moment of the performance, which passes and can never be re-created again.

This is best illustrated by the production and interaction of what I can only describe as “energy” in the course of a performance. As performers we produce a kind of energy, which affects the audience who, in turn, may respond in kind. This interaction of energies is a dynamic force that creates moments that can never be repeated again within the performance. The sustained production of such energy is very much dependent on the contributing factors of the performance. As performers move on and off stage, the audience attention may falter. Different performers create different energies with different audiences, co-performers and with different venues. The relationship between these factors is like two mirrors that face each other, creating a multitude reflection upon reflection. While bearing similarities, none of the reflections can be said to be entirely the same as another. What we perceive as the repeatability of these reflections in performance are conditions created by the limitations of social and cultural contexts. For instance, in a performance, the audience generally clap their hands to show their appreciation of the performance. Louder, prolonged clapping that continues even after the curtains are lowered generally signifies greater appreciation than softer clapping that ends once the curtains drop. As a result, we perform according to norms of the contexts we are performing in and the implications of these for the socio-cultural self⁷¹ will be further explored in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

Buddhist philosophers also believe that the physical body mediates between our internal world (a sense of consciousness bounded by the limitations of the body) and the external world (that which is outside of our bodies including socio-cultural conventions imposed on us by the communities we are a part of), permitting an interaction between the two. Since our experience of life is grounded in our physical

⁷¹ The self that exists within and is defined by the framework of socio-cultural norms that may exist in a community of people.

being and its interaction with the external world, it stands to reason that our body plays a pivotal point in how we make sense of the world and our experiences, which reinforces the importance that Merleau-Ponty gave to the act of perception. Truth, or a *sense* of absolute knowledge therefore, “is not to be found in the shifting opinions of the world but in the only realisable thing there is: our own existence” (Bancroft, 1979:12). In Zen Buddhism, this corporeal body is known as the *basho* or the somatic self, the *basho* being defined as the place or “ground which supports all things existing in space.... The *basho* is a fundamental restriction on beings’ existence; without it, no being can exist in the world” (Yuasa, 1987:57). The *basho* that is our corporeal body is therefore the most basic element of our experience of our existence. It is in fact the basis for that existence and our participation in our physical and cultural environment. However, this body is not without ambiguity. While it is undoubtedly a physical object, a thing, it is also the wellspring of our consciousness or ego, an aspect of our subjectivity. It is both the subject and the object; it is both that which sees and that which is seen.

Traditionally, religions have largely been governed by the presence of a higher being who acts as a guiding force to which we must aspire so as to attain eternal happiness. Developed within the context of such an ideological tradition, Cartesian philosophy of the self often turns away from the body and the present. It prefers instead to form solutions abstracted from our life space in the belief that enlightenment will come in the future through the practice of specialised actions that involve the elusive soul or spirit to which we transcend in order to attain some higher realm. In more recent decades, modern Western philosophy has turned to science and technology for solutions to problems and as a means of attaining higher states of

being or living. These solutions often involve escaping from or radically altering the aspects of our existence that we find dissatisfactory.

In contrast, “Zen is the day to day and moment to moment practice of this moment. It is the transmission of yourself to yourself” (Hoshin, 1995, p.1). The focus is on what we have right now in both a material and non-material sense and not what we might have in the future. It is about confronting what we face now and making the solution occur simultaneously. It happens (or should happen) in everyday life at every moment and not as a unique event or moment towards which we strive. It is not about catharsis, about release or enlightenment via the occurrence of a sole, earth-shattering event. Buddhism teaches us that the body is a potential, a possibility that we must develop to reach enlightenment. It is said that

“the original Buddhist goal nirvana (or ‘salvation’, if one wishes to use a Western term) was the realisation that life’s meaning lay in the here-and-now and not in some remote realm or celestial state far beyond one’s present existence” (Ross, 1981, p.29).

It is consequently this belief that we are our own path to enlightenment (in the absence of a divine entity or the transcendence to another plane) that sets Buddhism apart from most other religions. It is also this belief that parallels Merleau-Ponty’s theory of phenomenology, making the two systems of thought important partners in our quest to situate the enlightened self in the everyday world. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of phenomenology helps the Cartesian thinker to gain entry into the world of the embodied mind through a philosophy that looks at the experience of self through lived accounts that explain the why and how of our perception of our selves. Buddhism on the other hand turns its focus to the question of

how and why we *become* who we are. In its theorisation about meditative practices and other self cultivation practices, and in Zeami's examination of the development of the performer, we gain a greater understanding of how individuals and communities become.

We have a general tendency to perceive our daily experiences as having been achieved without the need for specialised training. However, when we reflect on our personal history, we see that these skills are the result of time spent learning (whether consciously or unconsciously) such skills as they are presented to us in our life-worlds. Experiences like walking and writing require some training and practice wherein a cohesive mental and physical effort is made to learn the desired skill. Eventually, we come to a point whereby no conscious effort is required to perform these activities. However, these experiences are not equivalent to the experience of *satori*⁷² described in Buddhism. Zen Buddhists define pure experiences as those experiences whereby we lose consciousness of our selves and there is no distinction between the function of the body and mind. This way of being is known as *samādhi* or the state of no-mind. Bancroft explains that

“the aim of Zen training is to attain the state of consciousness which occurs when the individual ego is completely emptied of itself and becomes identified with the infinite Reality of all things... It is an immediate seeing into the nature of things instead of the usual understanding through analysis and logic. In practice it means the unfolding of a new and changed world, a world previously hidden by the many confusions of the dualistically oriented mind. All contradictions are harmonised by the miracle of *satori*, and the experience is one involving the whole person, not a mere psychological insight or highly charged

⁷²*Satori* is the moment of enlightenment.

ecstasy. *Satori* leads to total revaluation of the personality, and, perhaps even more important, it opens the mind to a wider and deeper feeling for life, so that even the most trivial incidents and tasks gain new significance” (1979:9-10).

Consequently, for us to attain *satori*, there must be an awareness or consciousness of this unity, of having no-mind. It is therefore neither a sense of self-consciousness nor unconsciousness but *consciousness* of a different form.

Everyday experiences do not meet with this criterion as they are regarded as the enactment of habits formed during the course of our lives and are often performed unconsciously. An example of the Zen distinction between habitual and conscious action can be observed in the story of the monk Tenno. When asked if he placed his umbrella to the left or the right side of his shoes as he entered his master’s house, Tenno could not give an answer (Suler, 2000, [online]), thus exemplifying the necessity (as theorised in Zen Buddhism) for consciousness in daily action.

The habitual actions of our daily life are so sedimented into our being that we generally perform them unconsciously and while this assimilation may be considered a step toward *nirvana*, it is also often *mistaken* as such. These everyday experiences and the spiritual experience of the transcendent self (which is the ultimate goal of meditative and other cultivation practices) can be likened to the difference between the genius and the ordinary, the creative and the mundane⁷³. There is a difference in the level of intensity in the experiences, as if the transcendent experience is somehow more “real”, more “present” than that of habitual action. In elucidating the experience of *satori*, Bancroft writes that

⁷³ This is however a rather crude distinction as the aim of Zen practice is to bring *satori* into every moment of our lives no matter how ordinary or mundane the action.

“*satori* is the pivot of Zen life. It is at once the last and the first step, the goal and the beginning, because to attain *satori* is to experience the natural state of the mind from which all good actions flow and in which there is an illumined recognition of the harmony of life.... This may take years to reach full growth, which is why it is considered a first step as well as a last, but *satori* is the stick, which sounds the gong and shatters the silence of ignorance. To the one who has experienced this turnabout in his nature, life becomes ever more ‘empty and marvellous’” (1979:10).

The aim of Zen cultivation then is to open the path to a kind of super awareness of every moment of our life. This can be described as the nature of the enlightenment that Zen practitioners work towards.

There are distinctions in the progression of the different *basho* from being an inauthentic self to an authentic one which can be experienced in any learning situation. A beginner dance student for instance will often experience a disjuncture whereby the body does not move with the mind’s intent or executes movements that are wholly unintended. With practice and conscious application of body and mind, the desired movement can soon be executed at will. In time, and with constant repetition, the movement becomes habitualized and can be rendered without conscious effort. This stage is what Yuasa, a contemporary scholar of Zen philosophy, would call the “*basho vis a vis being*” (1987). While the execution of the movement has become sedimented into our being, there is still a consciousness of self in the sense that we are aware that we are dancing; we are consciously being a dancer. Alternatively, as is often witnessed in young dance students, the dancer is unconscious of what he/she is doing and is unaware of any effect created and thus true comprehension or awareness still eludes him/her. To reach the state of the *basho vis a vis nothing*, the movement

must neither be consciously or unconsciously performed but become an extension of the bodymind self. We are no longer an ego-consciousness who is performing a particular movement, we simply are (both “the dancer and the dance”) and our consciousness of self is forgotten. Thus, the distinction between the intent to express and the action itself ceases to exist and this is consequently said to change our perception of the life-world. This is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to as flow, an optimal experiencing of whatever it is we are doing, which will be further explored in the third chapter.

It is difficult if not impossible to accurately describe the experience of the *bashovisavisnothing* beyond this, as this *basho* exists between the physical and the intellectual world and cannot therefore be properly expressed outside that place and moment of between-ness. It is something that has to be experienced in order to be clearly understood and for this reason, traditional Zen masters (following the example set by Buddha) avoided speaking more explicitly about this experience of the bodymind self. At the same time, the *basho vis a vis being* and *basho vis a vis nothing* cannot be properly described as states or stages in the way we assign categories such as good, bad, hot or cold. It is not really a state to which we arrive but a process through which we express ourselves as enlightened beings. Even this process of enlightenment is not permanent. It is constantly in flux as is the self and its environment. Hence enlightenment, in this sense, is the discovery of the path through which we are most likely to attain a sense of body-mind togetherness where we are fully invested in the moment.

Cultivation techniques in Sōtō and Rinzai Zen Buddhism

For a greater insight into the rationalisation of self-realisation as a process, we progress now to the study of Sōtō Buddhism, one of the two main sects of Zen Buddhism. Through the work of Dōgen (the founder of the Sōtō sect), we learn about the importance of daily practice in self-enlightenment (or the state of being), the place of self cultivation techniques and the momentariness of experience. We also come to understand the significance of the relationship between the bodymind self and its external environment through Dōgen's theorisation of the act of meditation and its relevance to the process of self-formation.

There are two main schools or sects that teach Zen Buddhism in Japan today⁷⁴. Although both sects share similar precepts and beliefs regarding enlightenment, they take a decidedly different approach towards it. While both sects place great value on hard work and human labour as part of the process of enlightenment, the nature of work and labour they favour are quite different. For the Rinzai sect, the focus of their labour is to study the *koans*⁷⁵, whereas the Sōtō sect has a more day-to-day, pragmatic and physical approach toward their labouring.

The Rinzai sect is the older of the two sects and was founded by Lin Chi (Rinzai in Japanese), a Buddhist monk from China. Lin Chi was known for his straightforward approach and use of “shock” tactics (such as hitting a student with a stick) to “awaken” his pupils from conventional ways of thought into enlightenment. The Rinzai method also suggests that realisation is something we arrive at suddenly, through some cathartic experience which opens our consciousness to an “ultimate truth”. Lin Chi also began the use of “Ho” (or “Kwatz” now in Japan), a term with no

⁷⁴ Both sects and their respective ideologies originate from China and are consequently influenced by Taoism.

⁷⁵ A *koan* is an open-ended riddle or story the meaning of which cannot be explained to one but must come as one's own realisation.

particular meaning but of great philosophical significance⁷⁶, to serve the same purpose. The Rinzai sect also came to emphasise the use of *koans*, which are a kind of riddle, as the main form of study towards this “sudden” enlightenment.

Dōgen (1200-1253) was the founder of the Japanese Sōtō Zen sect. After suffering the loss of his parents at an early age, Dōgen became a Buddhist monk with the Rinzai sect at thirteen and attained enlightenment under the guidance of Rinzai master Eisai. Despite having reached enlightenment, Dōgen found the precepts taught by the Rinzai sect to still be lacking, particularly in its explanation for the need for practice in order to reach enlightenment since we are all supposed to be inherently enlightened. It was not until he moved to China to study under Master Ju Ching that he realised what was lacking. This realisation came to him while practising *zazen* (a form of seated meditation). From this experience, he saw that

“*zazen* was not a mere sitting still, it was a dynamic opening up of the Self to its own Reality directly, by letting go of all ideas about life. When life is experienced without the ego intervening, the experience is that of its true and numinous nature” (Bancroft, 1979:19).

In other words, practice is not just a way or means that brings us to enlightenment. Instead practice is, in itself, enlightenment. Armed with this new realisation, he returned to Japan and began his own Zen sect which some refer to as the school of “gradual” enlightenment, in contrast to the “sudden” realisation and “shock” tactics of the Rinzai sect.

⁷⁶ “Ho” and “Kwatz” are out-of-the-ordinary, meaningless sounds in the Buddhist lexicon whose sole purpose is to break our sense of normality, be it the conventional association of words and sounds with specific meanings or simply as an aberrant noise in our everyday flow of thought and activity.

The philosophy of Dōgen’s Sōtō sect is based on two main principles: that we are all inherently enlightened and, hence, there is no difference between practice and enlightenment. As Yokoi explains, because

“Sōtō Zen considers that Buddha-nature is inherent in all beings and is a universal quality, not something that is to be acquired by selected individuals, the practice of Zen is not a means to enlightenment. Practice in itself is the goal” (1976:10).

This Buddha-nature is the quality that, in a more conventional sense, makes us like Buddha or, to put it in a more appropriately Buddhist manner, a Buddha. It is not the end product in an assembly line towards which we progress or develop; nor is it a quality that we possess in some latent form to be tapped into once we find the right key or code. Instead, it is manifested in what we do or, rather, our actions and the manifestation of Buddha-nature are one and the same phenomena. Hence, as Masao notes, “Dharma-nature or Buddha-nature does not exist as a direct and unmediated reality. It is disclosed only through our own resolve and practice in time and space as an indispensable *condition*” (1988:2).

In his treatises (particularly the *Shōbōgenzō*) Dōgen is very clear in his instructions on the physical placement or posture of the practitioner. He writes at length about the posture one should assume when performing *zazen*, stating that this is a very important aspect of *zazen*⁷⁷. He also describes in some detail the physical layout of rooms to be used for practising *zazen*, eating and a host of other activities. From this we gather the importance of our everyday physical habits and environment

⁷⁷ It is interesting to note here that classical ballet and other art dance styles also place great importance on posture as a key to proficiency in the dance form. This is a point I shall expand upon in the next chapter.

to Dōgen. It also indicates that Dōgen attributed the physical body with more than a passing significance in the practice of enlightenment. In keeping with the mindful and disciplined attitude Buddhists have traditionally adopted towards the body, Dōgen believes that “we quest with the body, practice with the body, attain enlightenment with the body, and understand with the body” (Kim, 1987:96). If Buddha-nature were inherent in each of us, it would only seem logical to begin our search for it by turning our attention towards our selves. Moreover, as the most readily available and tangible aspect of self we have to study is our physical self, our bodies, it is not surprising that Dōgen (and many others) turned to physical discipline as a form of enlightenment practice.

This is not to imply that the mind has no place in Dōgen’s view of the world or, for that matter, that the body assumes precedence over the mind. Instead, Dōgen writes that “the body necessarily fills the mind and the mind invariably penetrates the body” (Dōgen as cited in Kim, 1987:97). Hence, in Dōgen’s opinion, the body and mind are coextensive of each other and their qualities and functions necessarily interpenetrate one another. The body-aspect and mind-aspect exist therefore in a non-dual unity of body and mind (*shinjin-ichinyo*). While we can conceptually distinguish between body and mind, we are unable to make a similar division between the two in our lived experience; where does mind end and body begin and vice versa? There are no pure states in the lived experience. We do not have either purely mental or purely physical experiences. Conversely, one cannot deny or ignore that *body* and *mind* perform different functions of the self. Again, we arrive at the conundrum we first explored with the *skhanda* theory. Neither one nor the other is the sum of the self, yet we cannot say that they perform similar functions or that the removal or change in one will not affect the whole. To comprehend this complexity in the non-dualism of the

body-mind unity, Dōgen suggests understanding non-duality not as “the transcendence of duality so much as the realisation of duality” (Kim, 1987:100). It is only when we discard previous notions of opposing polarities (as found in Cartesian dualism) and questions on the ontology of the self, and accept this alternative thesis that we can understand the regard which Dōgen gives toward both the training and discipline of body and mind for enlightenment.

As we experience the body and mind as a non-dual unity that we refer to as the self, we may assume that any change acting upon one would necessarily affect the other as well (as previously stated). Shaner explains that it is therefore Dōgen’s view that

“since the body and mind are verified experientially as one, then any effort focused upon the body-aspect will have a direct affect upon the mind-aspect. Correct posture has such an affect. Any physical tension or impairment of the physiological functions inevitably affects mind-aspect intentions” (1985:161).

Consequently, we begin to see and comprehend the importance of posture and physical placement in enlightenment practices. We also begin to understand why Dōgen favoured the practice of *zazen* over other enlightenment practices. Performing *zazen* facilitates our awareness of the body-mind unity by turning our focus onto ourselves, the function of our bodies and the free flow of thought.

This is a theory that is evident in the carriage of dancers trained in different styles of dance in terms of the images and ideas they can create in the minds of their audience by the mere presence of their being. A ballet dancer is, for instance, trained to maintain a long uplifted posture, which creates the ethereal, otherworldly image and long clean lines so highly prized in the balletic style. He/she maintains a level of

detachment from the audience as he/she gazes upwards and outwards into the space beyond. Regardless of how difficult the movement might be, the ballet dancer's carriage must always convey effortless ease, freedom and fluidity. In contrast, the flamenco dancer looks his/her audience in the eye, communing directly with a gaze and posture often wracked with emotion and conflict. The body curls into itself and, even when reaching out, conveys earthy and internal catharsis. Moreover, flamenco dancers who prance around in the manner of ballet dancers would be derided as not having this *duende*, which is regarded as the essence of flamenco.

In addition, Dōgen also sees the body as a Möbius strip (to borrow a term from Western philosophical thought) between the “internal” and “external” world.

“The human body participates in our inner world as well as in our external world, and in turn, both the inner and outer world participate in each other through the human body. The mind, body and nature interpenetrate one another so inseparably that a hard and fast demarcation between them is altogether impossible” (Kim, 1987:98).

Again we return to the concept of the *basho* explored earlier. The corporeal body is in effect both our sense of connection and distinction from all that exists outside it. Moreover, what exists outside it is often subjective (particularly when dealing with notions of behaviour, ideas and other such intangibles) but socially assigned physical images of representation used for clearer demarcation and identification⁷⁸. For instance, the extent of this limitation can be tested by our integral use of and dependence on tools in our performance of self. When properly assimilated into

⁷⁸ For example, the cross often represents Christianity and we either view this as part of our identity or feel no connection with it.

his/her sense of being, the racquet of a skilled tennis player can become a responsive extension of him/herself rather than an object in his/her hand. As such, our sense of body is itself ever changing and may, at times, include (physically) external or foreign objects (like spectacles or shoes) or exclude our own corporeal body⁷⁹. Hence, our sense of body is not merely physical but very much perceptual as well.

It is in the light of such revelations that Dōgen follows the Mahayana Buddhist tradition of using the term *mind* to describe “the totality of psycho-physical realities” as well as “the entire universe of the entire mind” (Kim 1987:111). The phrase “psycho-physical realities” is an indication that the *mind* Dōgen speaks of is perceptual rather than an abstracted phenomena or consciousness with an independent existence that dwells in the human brain. Tsuji observes that for Dōgen,

“this mind... does not exist independently or rise suddenly now in a vacuum. It is neither one nor many, neither spontaneous nor accomplished. [This mind] is not my body, and my body is not in my mind. This mind is not all pervasive throughout the entire world. Neither before nor after, neither existent nor non-existent does it obtain. It bears not upon self-nature or other nature, upon common nature or causeless nature” (1953:272).

It is perhaps unfortunate then that Dōgen’s translators have had to rely on the word *mind* to describe this phenomenon. I believe Dōgen’s intended meaning is broader than the normal implications of the word⁸⁰, particularly to those of us who are more familiar with a Cartesian understanding of the term. *Mind*, as Dōgen intended it, is

⁷⁹ A person suffering from a dissociative disorder may experience dissociation from certain parts of their bodies. Oliver Sacks gives a lucid account of this experience in his book *A Leg To Stand On* (1984).

⁸⁰ That is, mind as encompassing intellectual or mental process only.

much more than a set of intellectual or mental processes. It is closer perhaps to what we may refer to as the *perceptual self*.

“Mind comes into and out of being with the psycho-physical activities of the mind and the creative activities of the physical universe. Yet it is not just coextensive with them nor in proportion to them, but transcends the sum total of them” (Kim, 1987:116).

The impression of *mind* or *self* we derive from Kim’s explanation is that of a performed and performing self, a self conceived and defined through its actions and interactions with itself and its environment. Unlike Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the perceptual self, this self Dōgen refers to is not a self that perceives (suggesting a kind of self consciousness) as part of how it constructs and defines itself, but one that is acting and responding to its environment as a way of becoming and being a self. This is also the self or *mind* that is the ground from which the Buddha-nature emerges.

It is through this re-definition of *mind* that Dōgen re-defines our understanding of *consciousness* and *supra-consciousness* as explored in the *skhanda* theory of self. When we speak therefore of *supra-consciousness*, we are not referring to the processes of thinking or not-thinking as we know them (i.e. purely mental or purely physical processes). Rather, we are referring to *non-thinking*, where our behaviour can be described as neither thinking nor not-thinking, neither mental nor physical. Non-thinking is like an instinctual response or action accompanied by a heightened consciousness. There is no thought prior to the action but there is, at the same time, no action without thought. And while we are aware of what we are doing, we are by no

means *consciously* guiding our actions. Action and thought are one and the same. As Kim explains it,

“the function of non-thinking is not just to transcend both thinking and not-thinking, but to realise both, in the absolutely simple and singular act of immovable sitting itself. Ultimately, there is nothing but the singular act of immovable sitting in meditation which itself is the thought of immovable sitting in meditation” (1987:59-60).

Again we return to Dōgen’s point on the realisation of duality in non-dualism, a significant concept in Dōgen’s thought. What Dōgen teaches is a *Way* between two fundamental extremes; it is neither one nor the other but both simultaneously without precedence, and in itself something completely different from either extreme. This is, in a sense, the effect of fusion whereby something new (like a theory or dance style) is created from the combination of different styles or ideas. It is as if the two extremes are parents whose resulting progeny are complete and individual in themselves but can still trace their origins and characteristics back to their predecessors.

Dōgen’s notion of *consciousness* is, again, more than a mental or physical act; it is a psychophysical function. We are conscious of a physical self and we become conscious because of our physical self. It is through our body that we know things and it is also this body, which helps determine how we know things. As such, the Buddhist view is that “meditation and wisdom⁸¹ are the foot and eye of Buddhism. Wisdom is never conceived apart from meditation, and vice versa” (Kim, 1987:48). As thought and action are one and the same for Dōgen, he maintains that *zazen*, or

⁸¹ Or practice and thought.

meditation, is a psychophysical activity through which Buddha-nature manifests itself.

The emergence of the Buddha-nature also comes from the wisdom or knowledge that we gain through our lived experience; a lived experience which occurs *in this body, in this mind and in this place*. Therefore,

“the activity of the body-mind becomes the vehicle of understanding as well as the embodiment of truth: we understand as we act or act as we understand. The fundamental concept, understanding, is activity, in Dōgen’s thought. Understanding is indispensably associated with our whole being” (Kim, 1987:95).

Conventional Cartesian dualism often associates understanding and knowledge with objectivity and reason, a faculty of the conventional notion of mind. Feeling and intuition or instinct on the other hand are subjective reactions and thus relegated to the domain of the body and fleeting emotion. This polarisation in our conception and explanation for the mechanics of how we know something is most contentious when applied to our actual experience and contrasts sharply with Dōgen’s insistence on the function of body-mind unity in the way that we comprehend and learn.

Dualism also divides the relationship of the self and world into two main polarities, the subject and the object; the subject being the self and the object being all things and beings that is not the self. This self is further divided into its objective and subjective functions (as mentioned above). The lived experience of mind-body unity however, dissolves such distinctions between objective and subjective functions as well as subject-object identities. To use a well-known example of Merleau-Ponty’s, when the left hand touches the right, which is the subject and which is the object?

Similarly, as I observe a chemical reaction and try to decide if the colour produced is blue-green or merely green, where does my objectivity end and my subjectivity begin?

What Dōgen proposes in his notion of body-mind unity is not only the integration of mind-body function but extends to the interpenetration of self and external world, the subject and object. When one attains enlightenment, one also realises a sense of unity with all we have previously considered to be part of our selves. For Zen, this refers particularly to our relationships with other people and our environment. Enlightenment opens the way to a harmonious co-existence with all around us when we come to realise their inter-connection to us.

The Buddha-nature or Dharma-position is the absolute condition or experience of enlightenment that, according to Buddhist teachings, is inherent to all existence. “The Dharma [Buddha-nature] is amply present in each and every person, but unless one practices, it is not manifested; unless there is realisation, it is not attained” (Dōgen, 1972:129). While Buddhists generally acknowledge Buddha-nature as being inherent in every person, there has, simultaneously, always been a great emphasis in Buddhist teachings on the necessity of practice in order to *attain* this state of enlightenment. This is the enigma presented by Buddhist philosophy that caused Dōgen to question some of its tenets. His search for an answer to this question consequently formed the foundation for the development of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism.

What Dōgen came to realise through the practice of *zazen* was that “enlightenment is not something you possess but a way that you are; a way in which one interacts with one’s surrounding” (Shaner, 1985:132). Dōgen surmised that, the

attainment and practice of enlightenment⁸² are, like the body and mind of the self, “mutually inseparable” (Abe, 1988:8) and that “the former is indispensable as the ground and the latter is indispensable as the condition” (Abe, 1988:7). In other words, the inherent Buddha-nature is the foundation from which we can manifest ourselves as Buddha (i.e. an enlightened being). Without the inherent Buddha-nature, the process of becoming Buddha would not be possible. Yet without practice, there is no Buddha-nature. “The Buddha-nature is neither (1) something always there outside us which we attain or become, nor (2) something always there within us” (Stambaugh, 1990:47). Instead, both Buddha-nature and becoming a Buddha (attainment and attaining) arise simultaneously in practice. Each moment is therefore complete in itself, a moment of pure or absolute experience. Kim goes as far as to state that

“unless we take risks and choose to act, Buddha-nature never becomes visible, audible, tangible. Prior to human (and other sentient and insentient beings) creative activities and expressions, Buddha-nature cannot be said to exist in terms of potentialities, innate ideas, and so forth. This is why Dōgen says: ‘the logic of Buddha-nature is such that it is provided not before becoming a Buddha, but afterwards. Buddha-nature and becoming a Buddha create our own identity through our body and mind, only then does Buddha-nature create itself’” (1987: 65-66).

Understanding this concept is central to understanding Dōgen’s work. Although not the first to come to this realisation, the originality of Dōgen’s work is said to be his recognition that “both Buddha-nature and all dharmas are mediated by activity-unremitting and expression” (Kim, 1978:50). What Dōgen suggests is that Buddha-

⁸² Attainment is the Buddha-nature and practice is the process of becoming a Buddha.

nature is not only impermanent, but it is also subject to change and variance. It is no longer attributed with a “pre-eminent metaphysical status... absolutely independent of all dharmas” (Kim, 1978:50). Dōgen’s understanding of Buddha-nature therefore reveals the impermanence and emptiness of Buddha-nature.

Becoming in Sōtō Zen and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty

Although we often describe Buddha-nature in temporal terms, as arising at each moment of action and falling away, as coming and going, it is in truth “absolutely discrete and discontinuous” (Kim, 1987:150). This pattern of being and becoming is continually repeated and although we may experience such time as a continuous flow, this sense of continuity is best likened to a film reel, composed of many individual, separate stills running at a high speed. To this end, Kim observes that

“a Dharma-position is comprised of a particular here and a particular now (a spatio-temporal existence in the world), hence, it is inevitably comprised of the existential particularities – biological, psychological, moral, philosophical, religious, and so forth – which are observed, compared, judged, and chosen in the dualistic scheme of things. That is to say, the existential particularities in such a manner that they are now seen nondualistically in and through the mediation of absolute emptiness” (1987:149).

It is also important to note here that Dōgen stresses that while each Dharma-position has a “before” and “after”, it is at the same time absolute and discrete and therefore not continuous with any Dharma-positions which may have preceded or that will follow (Kim, 1978). This is subsequently why he stresses the importance of *satori*, moments of enlightenment, as opposed to a more lasting or absolute form of

enlightenment. He explains this using the changing of firewood into ash to illustrate his point, saying that

“once firewood turns to ash, the ash cannot turn back to being firewood. Still, one should not take the view that it is ashes afterward and firewood before. He should realise that although firewood is at the dharma-stage of firewood, and that this is possessed of before and after, the firewood is beyond before and after. Ashes are in the stage of ashes, and possess before and after” (Dōgen, 1973:136).

Although firewood is the “before” of ash and ash the “after” of firewood, firewood is not ash and vice versa (i.e. each is a unique and self-contained dharma-position in itself). Moreover, firewood cannot become firewood once more after being burnt to ash. As Heinrich explains, Dōgen sees that

“all dharmas exist from moment to moment, i.e., always only this moment... Firewood is firewood, and ashes are ashes, in every moment each a dharma and independent of the other” (1959-60:227).

Thus, there is no continuity or an in-between state or stage. What we may perceive as the process of firewood becoming ash is not a process at all but a sequence of spontaneous dharma-positions that occur (to our perception) in a linear continuum.

But Dōgen’s discourse on spontaneous dharma-positions and the non-linearity of time is not meant as a simple disputation of the conventional perception of temporality. Instead, as a discourse of transcendence, it points to a different way of thinking of and understanding that the act of perception itself is not complete or omniscient since the nature of the objects it engages with is also temporal. Therefore,

in making us explore the non-linearity of being and the subsequent incompleteness of perception as a linear process, it is Dōgen's intention that we arrive at a sense of self that finds completion from moment to moment as opposed to the completion of a future transcendence. As such,

“each and every being (for example, firewood), because it is the manifestation of the total dynamism of all dharmas while abiding in its own dharma-stage, cannot be seen as sequentially turning into or *becoming* another being (for example, ashes). The relationship of one being and another being is not a process of *becoming* (*seisei*) but a spontaneous manifestation (*genjo*)” (Abe, 1988:18).

In this view, there only ever *is*, be it firewood, burning firewood, burnt firewood or ash. Each *is* a dharma-position, a moment of completeness. As Stambaugh phrases it, “life does not extend from the beginning of a stretch of linear time to its end. Life is a stage of total time and death is a stage of total time” (1990:46).

For Dōgen and Merleau-Ponty, time is therefore understood as “not separable from things taking place and events going on – but rather *is*, ‘is-es’ these things and events” (Stambaugh, 1990:45). It is through this argument that the statement made previously that Buddha-nature does not exist in some latent form waiting to be used or to become but is manifested at the moment of enlightenment is further validated by Dōgen. As Kim explains,

“the self-realisation of Buddha-nature in its myriad forms of existence defies the model of processes, degrees, and levels from potentiality to actuality, from the hidden to the manifest, from the lower to the higher, from the imperfect to the perfect: quite the contrary, it is the realization that each form of existence is

perfect and self-sufficient in its ‘total exertion’ (*gūjin*) in the Dharma position (*hōi*), amounting to the total actualisation of Buddha-nature” (1987:126).

Hence, for Dōgen, Buddha-nature is inherent in everything that we do. Each moment of “action”⁸³ is the actualisation of Buddha-nature, and

“to abide in a Dharma-position, therefore, should not be construed as instrumental and subsidiary to some idea of eternity, but, rather, as an end in itself – as eternity in itself” (Kim, 1987:149).

We strive, therefore, not towards a distant goal or promise but one that occurs in the moment of action. Our efforts are process driven rather than goal driven and the so-called goal or promise is the process itself. As such, every moment is regarded by Zen Buddhists as a moment in which all life, past, present and future is encapsulated and passes away, like tiny motes of light which flicker and fade into the night almost instantly. In explaining this phenomenon of space and time, Stambaugh writes that

“presencing right now contains past and future within itself; past and future are not, so to speak, stretched out like planks over an abyss on which one can go forward or backward. They are not bridges to future or past moments” (1990:48).

Thus the Buddha-nature is not a static potential we can cultivate and keep. Instead, it is impermanent and requires constant practice and self-cultivation for re-creation from moment to moment.

⁸³ Action in this context does not necessarily indicate activity involving great physical exertion like taking part in sport. Instead, action in this context includes everyday activities such as sitting. For Zen Buddhists belonging to the Sōtō sect particularly, action for them means *zazen*, which is the practice of sitting meditation, the moment of stillness.

It is also this impermanence of the Buddha-nature that makes each moment unique and unrepeatable. Much like Merleau-Ponty's body of space and time, the Buddhist nature is an inconstant and cannot therefore provide

“a continuing ‘place’ to which the present moment can make a transition, past and future, so to speak, from a barrier, thus ensuring the dwelling of a dharma-situation. Past and future belong to that dharma-situation and hold it in place. At the same time the dharma-situation is cut off from past and future” (Stambaugh, 1990:50).

This “holding in place” particularises the moment of now-ness that, once passed, cannot be regained. It is this dynamic property of the Buddha-nature, which accounts for the impermanence and changeability of our existence as well as for the particularity and uniqueness of experience. There is nothing else continuous to this moment that precedes it or will follow. As Kim says, “the passage of time is neither a succession nor a span of now-moments; rather, it is the epochal dynamicity of the absolute present” (1978:67). Human activity should not therefore be regarded as a build-up toward something in the future or as a reaction to something in the past. Instead we should view and participate in all activity as *the* goal, as the self-contained actualisation of that goal (i.e. Buddha-nature).

To this end, Dōgen maintained that the pursuit and attainment of enlightenment must occur in the here and now of inconsequential, mundane activities as well as the extraordinary and not some distant, abstract future time and place. Consequently, although the Sōtō sect emphasized the practice of *zazen* over other practices as a manifestation of enlightenment (as opposed to the study of the *koans*), the sect also

believed that enlightenment could be attained through the conscious practice of daily activities. In his research on the subject, Shaner adds that

“if body and mind are originally one and are innate in everyone... and if this original oneness is presented during everyday activities of lay persons and disciples alike, then presencing the bodymind ground at the base of all experience seems to arise out of *doing nothing*. That is, enlightenment does not mean attaining or possessing some *thing* new. To the contrary, enlightenment is the *activity* of being constantly aware, through everyday actions, of the innate bodymind ground within the horizon” (1985:183).

Such an argument reinforces the Sōtō Zen commitment to the practice of everyday activity for the attainment of enlightenment. More importantly, this argument supports the belief that all action is potentially enlightened action. This belief also takes the attainment of enlightenment out of the realm of the extraordinary and into the everyday sphere.

In contrast to Sōtō Zen practices, the Rinzai sect emphasised the study of *koans* as a means to enlightenment. To the followers of the Rinzai sect, *zazen* was regarded as a passive way of pursuing enlightenment that did not follow their theory of sudden enlightenment (as opposed to the gradual enlightenment espoused by the Sōtō sect). For advocates of the Rinzai sect, the *koans* provided a means of active mental pursuit of enlightenment, searching to understand the conundrums provided by these riddles. Compared with the Sōtō sect, the Rinzai approach to enlightenment required a degree of literacy and commitment towards the scholarly study of the *koans*, suggesting a kind of elitism in its process.

Conversely, the Sōtō approach to enlightenment is more readily accessible and universally attainable since it regards all forms of activity as the practice or manifestation of enlightenment. For the average person, it also means that we need not immerse ourselves into some special form of study to attain an enlightened life. Instead, all we need to do is to immerse ourselves *consciously* into the actions of our daily lives to open the way for enlightenment. It also suggests that enlightenment is not attainable only if one becomes a great master of one's elite choice of activity (i.e. meditation, study of *koans*, artistic pursuit), but is open to all participants.

More importantly, while the Rinzai sect tended to teach the *use* of *koans* as a means to enlightenment, under Dōgen's guidance, the Sōtō sect regards the *koans* and other disciplines of practice *as* enlightenment. Thus for Sōtō Zen Buddhists, it is the *practice* that is important and not so much the nature of the activity itself. Or, as Yokoi puts it,

“the essence of Zen is, of course, to realise this mind of the Buddha. This realisation is known as *satori*, or enlightenment, in Japanese Zen. But such enlightenment is not the goal of our training. For in essence there is no difference between practice and enlightenment, and vice versa. According to Dōgen, a little training is already shallow enlightenment, just as thorough training is deep enlightenment” (1976:19).

Again, we return to Dōgen's emphasis on the dynamic quality of the Buddha-nature. He believed that there must be a continual pursuit of enlightenment, that it is not possible to attain enlightenment once and therefore be enlightened always, and that “practice after having realised enlightenment is just as important as that preceding it” (Yokoi, 1976:32). The importance of this ceaseless practice becomes particularly

apparent when one considers Dōgen's chief contention that "there is no gap between practice and enlightenment" (Yokoi, 1976:12). Thus to maintain (so to speak) our enlightenment, it becomes necessary to make it a part of our daily life and habit.

The importance of practice can be clearly illustrated by the learning process. Of course we are familiar with the initial difficulties we encounter when learning anything new. It is however in the latter stages of learning that we truly appreciate the importance of practice towards developing and maintaining a sense of *satori*. As someone who has from time to time allowed my practice of dance to lapse, I can say that the importance of daily (or regular) practice can by no means be understated. After a break of two years, I started dancing again and during my first class back; it amazed me how much I had forgotten of something I had been doing since I was five. Even now, whenever I resume after an extended break from dancing, it takes a while for my body and mind to re-familiarise themselves with movements I have been executing for years. It is for this reason that, for the Sōtō Zen practitioner finds that,

"attaining *sokushin zebutsu* ("this very mind is Buddha") is a mode of awareness that must be sedimented into one's everyday life. Simple activities such as drinking tea and eating rice must be performed with the same mode of awareness as sitting in *zazen*. The 'three activities' (deeds, words, and thoughts) of human life must all be governed by nothing more than presencing the immediate situation-as-it-is" (Shaner, 1985:179-180).

When taken in this context, the pursuit of the proverbial "Art for Art's sake", for example, thus takes on a meaning similar to that conceived in the West. The practice itself is the end goal; there is no other. We paint, dance or write because we paint, dance or write and we do not contemplate anything beyond that. The difference

between the two is that the pursuit of Art for Art's sake in some quarters has become fixated with stylisation (something Zeami, a Noh master, cautioned against). While there certainly exists a pursuit for perfection and innovation within each art form and style, these should not be the driving force behind the desire to practice that art form. Instead, one should be able to derive as much pleasure, completion and enlightenment in both our participation as a student in an ordinary dance class as well as our masterful performance as a professional on stage. Dōgen provides us with an experiential theorisation of being that allows for self-realisation to be achieved through the performance of the everyday. This insistence on enlightenment as not a way of being (i.e. who we are and what we do) but a manner of being (i.e. how we are) breaks down myths that some ways of being may be better than others and equalises individuals in their pursuit of self realization as well as helping us to understand socio-cultural philosophies of self-realisation, the issue at the centre of my thesis.

And yet to understand self-realisation and enlightenment, it is important that we do account for the qualitative difference in the enlightenment experienced by the student and the professional dancer, as the two are different experiences. To quote Yokoi on Dōgen's work once again, "a little training is already shallow enlightenment, just as thorough training is deep enlightenment" (1976:19). This notion of the different qualities in different experiences is something that Zeami writes extensively about in his treatises on Nō theatre and performance. Indeed the principles of Zen can be adapted to almost any aspect of life since being a Zen practitioner is not only about the study of the *koans* or frequent meditation. Instead, it requires one to live, be or to perform the Zen principles in every moment of our lives.

Impermanence and enlightenment in Nōtheatre

The treatises written by Zeami are unique and relevant to an understanding of self as performance. These treatises present to us the crucial juxtaposition of the practice and theorisation of the Zen self in their philosophy, highlighting (through the experience, study and teaching of Nō theatre) the various enlightened stages of self-cultivation that stems directly from Dōgen's work. More importantly, the treatises also allow us (through the use of stage performance as an allegory/equivalent for life performance) to progress from the exploration of the relationship of the self with itself and an amorphous space-time environment to an examination of the relationship between the self and other complicit selves (or audience) in distinct moments in space and time, and what this means for the way we cultivate ourselves through various practices. In other words, these works enable us to understand how much influence self cultivation techniques have over the person we are or present to the world and what this means in terms of cultural identity.

In theatre (and the performing arts in general), the question of identity arises in the construction of character in the actor's performance. Although the success of any performance lies in some part in the complicity of the audience and their willingness to "suspend their belief", the actor's skill at role playing his/her character is a significant element of the theatrical process. The skill of the actor may surface in different ways, including the observance of theatrical norms and conventions, as well as the subversion and/or disregard of these traditions and practices.

The learning of theatrical protocol, the role of the actor and audience in performance and the creation of worlds and identity in the moment of performance were issues, which Nō master Zeami (1363 – 1443) examined and theorised through his own experience as an actor and teacher in the Nō theatre. As one of the most

respected Japanese Nō⁸⁴ masters, Zeami wrote many instructional texts on Nō theatre and performance that are still referred to today. His father, Kan'ami (1333-1384), was himself a well-known actor and is credited with founding the basic principles of Nō performance through the development of his superior performance skills (Nogami, 1973). With the support of his father and the shogun Yoshimitsu, Zeami became in his own right an outstanding actor, director and writer of Nō theatre. It was his vision that led to the development and maturation of the Nō theatre into its current form. Outside Japan however, Zeami is perhaps better known for his prolific writing of treatises on the theatre and is still regarded as the foremost writer of Nō dramatic theory.

Zeami's writings began as a means of retaining the teachings of his father, Kan'ami. These eventually came to include his own ideas, particularly with his exile and the decline of his own acting career (as a result of political manoeuvring) (Yamazaki, 1984). Nō dramatic theory was originally contained in secret texts whose sole purpose was to be handed down as instructions for future generations of actors in the various performing groups, thus ensuring the survival of that group. The early death of Zeami's intended heir and son Motomasa made these texts all the more important for the continuation of his Kanze group. The height of his writing came with the decline of his stage career when, like a flower, he revealed a new aspect of his art.

Nō is the oldest form of formal Japanese theatre in existence and (as with many formal arts in Japan) was supported by the shoguns who formed part of the traditional Japanese upper-class. The ideology and interests of the Japanese upper class at the time were strongly influenced by the tenets of Zen Buddhism. In fact, Zeami lived and practised his art in a time when Zen Buddhism dominated intellectual

⁸⁴ Nō theatre is the classical dance-drama of Japan. Prior to the emergence of Nō and Kabuki, there existed no formal theatre in Japan. All forms of theatre were of a popular variety, consisting of mime, dance, etc.

and creative life in Japan. It is therefore not surprising that there is evidence of Zen influence not only in the content of Nō theatre but in its structure as well. Moreover, Zeami and his father were themselves devout followers of Buddhism who saw their art as a means of enlightening their audience, regardless of their status in life, and recommended an almost monastic approach to learning the craft of acting⁸⁵ (Yamazaki, 1984).

According to Zeami, an important principle of performance with its roots in Zen Buddhism is the notion of “Novelty”. Novelty, as defined by Zeami, is the intangible that keeps the audience from becoming jaded and helps retain their fascination for the theatre. In interpreting Zeami’s concept of Novelty, Yamazaki explains that

“Novelty means something the audience has not seen before, something that always remains fresh in its creative power. In Zeami’s mind, Novelty did not mean something odd or something that was singular in kind. It was a quality that emerged out of the technique of making the old look new by various devices used in theatrical presentation” (1984:xxxiv).

One of the images Zeami liked to use when describing the unfolding of the actor’s ability is that of the flower (*hana*). This image of the flower is itself derived from the popular use of the lotus flower as a symbol of Buddhism. It is also one of the main points Zeami emphasized in his first treatise, *Fūshikaden*⁸⁶. For Zeami, “a flower was beautiful because it would shed its petals. In the sense that a flower undergoes constant changes in front of the viewer, it can be compared to an artistic ideal”

⁸⁵ They endorsed the abstention from alcohol, sex and gambling; “vices” commonly prohibited in monastic life.

⁸⁶ Also known as *Kadensho* or *Teaching on Style and the Flower*.

(Rimer, 1984:xxiv). This theory of always trying to present a new aspect in each performance seeks to forestall the stagnation of both the art of the theatre as a whole as well as the development of the individual actor.

This theory of change and continual renewal also acknowledges the impermanence of life as taught in Buddhism. As time moves in a continuum, who can truly seek to hold on to a moment of enlightenment and re-create it to the same effect every time? The unfolding of the performer like the unfolding of a flower is the proper, natural development that allows for the growth, maturation and ageing of the actor. As Zeami observes,

“there is no flower that remains and whose petals do not scatter. And just because the petals scatter, then, when the flower blooms again, it will seem fresh and novel. An understanding of the principle of the Flower explains why in the Nō there does not exist that stagnation that results from the monotony of any single means of expression. As the Nō does not always remain the same, various new aesthetic qualities can be emphasised, bringing a sense of novelty” (1984:52).

In Nō theatre, this original interpretation of the novel is coupled with the fusion of what are normally regarded as antithetical characteristics in traditional Japanese aesthetics. In this aesthetic of paradox, Japanese aesthetic thought does not “encourage pursuit of any aesthetic ideal in one direction of purification. Rather, to the contrary, all aesthetic effects are believed to become what they are while containing contradictory elements within themselves” (Yamazaki, 1984: xxxvii). Such an aesthetic pays respect to the composite self, as body and mind, which subsequently

seeks a beauty that can appeal to its entirety. Moreover, as the self is always changing, Japanese aesthetics also understands that any stagnation would also result in *ennui*.

In a contemporary culture that has become increasingly trapped in the miasma of singular and enduring truths about the self (be they of individual, national or religious identity)⁸⁷, a theory of being and performance that accounts for and permits the physical, intellectual and emotional change and evolution of the self is in itself novel. Take, for instance, the choreographic and artistic direction of many current ballet companies: the emphasis on youth, its dexterity and energy has hampered the development of dancers as they age and created an impression of ballet as an art form to be pursued only by the young. Choreography that creates a demand for a physical ability which older dancers are no longer able to meet with often sees them passed over in favour of younger dancers. Their potential for development as older dancers is therefore prematurely curtailed by modern perceptions of classical ballet as is, perhaps, the scope and development of classical ballet as an art form. On the other hand, Zeami's theory of the unfolding of the flower emphasises the importance of the mature performer who, while having lost some physical ability, still has much to offer in his/her personal development and to the development of the art itself⁸⁸.

It is with such ideals in mind that the Nederlands Dans Theater III was established in 1991 as a company that employed dancers above forty years of age. Since its inception, the company has presented choreographers with the challenge of creating dances suitable to the abilities of the older dancer (without being patronising or sacrificing the integrity of their creative impulse). It has also allowed dancers like Gérard Lemaître (2000) who, during a discussion session in Perth, Western Australia,

⁸⁷ I cite here US President George W. Bush's post September 11 statement that "you are either with us or against us".

⁸⁸ In his treatise *Fūshikaden* he describes briefly the general progress of the actor within certain age groups.

commented that at seventy odd years he still felt that he had more to contribute to dance as a dancer. This is a significant statement in both the context of theatrical performance and the performance of identity, which points to the unceasing nature of the process of self-formation.

The concept of the flower also lends itself to an understanding of performance as being founded on the performance of preceding performers and performances, while still according due regard to individual creativity. The flower does after all grow from the seed, which is its foundation, be it one's own technical training, the history or tradition of the art or an inter-textual reference. There is here a sense of discontinuous continuity; while each seed is derived from a preceding flower it is itself unique and an ontological point of departure for a new flower. For,

“even though it might be said that our art consists of passing on the principles inherited from earlier generations, still there is much in a successful performance that comes from an actor's individual creativity on a particular occasion, so that written explanations themselves are not satisfactory. The real Flower derives from a mastery of the principles handed down from our predecessors, passed on by absorption from soul to soul” (Zeami, 1984:38).

Hence, while Zeami pays due respect to the significance of history, he also recognises the importance of individual interpretation in a performance. As such, he clearly states that without this “absorption” on the part of the performer, the resulting performance would merely be mimicry and lacking in Novelty. Zeami is not the only performer to recognise the necessity of personal interpretation. Although there are rules to every form of art, a degree of poetic license is often allowed in the interpretation or expression.

Moreover, according to Zeami, the novelty of the Novel is the taking of that which may be pedestrian and highlighting a unique quality about its being. In other words, it is not about doing something different or even simply doing it differently but doing it in a manner that is, in itself, unique because of the time and space in which it occurs and the connection that it makes with the audience. Take a face, for example: noses, eyes, mouths are standard enough for the police to develop general variations to assemble in their composite pictures to identify specific individuals. Similarly, a performance is made up of bits that are standard variations, but combine in that particular time and space to become something unique or “novel”.

Zeami (1984) believes that a real flower is one that *appears* novel to its audience rather than being something unique or different. He states that “the Flower is not something special in itself. The Flower represents a mastery of technique and rigorous practice, achieved in order to create a *feeling* of novelty” (Zeami, 1984:53). Moreover, Zeami attributes this feeling of novelty to the mastery of technique and places tremendous emphasis on the importance of the tradition of technique that we inherit in any art form. Instead of discarding such technique, classing them as passé and irrelevant to modern life, Zeami sees that the mastery of said technique is the first step in the development of an artist. Like the planting of the seed that will eventually grow into the Flower and continue to self-seed and subsequently produce more Flowers, technical mastery becomes the foundation from which our capacity to create, to be novel emerges.

At the same time, Zeami’s theory of performance emphasises the importance of the audience. Since Zeami believed that the function of the Nō theatre is to enlighten its audience regardless of their status, it is consequently the task of the performer to reach out to the audience with his/her performance. To this end, Zeami is

noted to have said: “whatever [is] suitable to the occasion is real *hana*” (1968:6). Additionally, Zeami’s recommended approach toward learning the craft of acting is for the actor to first assume the *appearance* of the role he/she is playing. As Nogami explains, “Zeami did not try to consider any stage technique except in terms of actual performance. That the simulation of personality as a stagecraft can find its way only through medium of display was his contention” (1973:49)⁸⁹. As such, Zeami writes that it is pointless for a female impersonator to *feel* like a woman if one does not *look and act* the part (stylised as it may be).

Zeami believed that an actor must look at him/herself from the viewpoint of his/her audience in order to “examine his appearance with his spiritual eyes and so maintain a graceful appearance with his entire body” (Zeami, 1984:81). Thus, the actor is encouraged to develop the ability to “see” him/herself from the audience’s point of view. This detached vision

“is ultimately a shared experience between the performer and each member of the audience but concentrated in the space surrounding both; exerting a mutual dramatic tension as stage and audience, it creates a site for detached viewing that brings the minds of the performer and the audience together, in other words a single *Nō* space” (Komparu, 1983:18).

On the surface, this conventional interaction between performer and audience appears to be a collective experience. It is, however, also an imagined sharing that is built on the staging of recognisable structures and conventions, which can simultaneously be interpreted differently by individual participants in the process. Such was the

⁸⁹ Nakamura goes so far as to state that “the *Nō* exists only in performance” (1971:15), once again drawing parallels with the more recent understanding of *performance* in modern academic theory.

significance of this performance process that Zeami regarded the audience as an essential part of the whole known as the *Nō*. Without the complicity of the audience, Zeami believed that the effect of the *Nō* would be compromised.

This theory or process of performance is certainly not unique to Zeami or, for that matter, to Japanese theatre. It does, however, hold itself in contrast to those theories of performance that highlight the importance of feeling or getting “into” the emotions of the role in order to achieve the right tone for a convincing portrayal. Zeami on the other hand states quite unreservedly from the beginning that the first step to a convincing performance is that which is sometimes perceived as the superficial or exterior aspect. In this context, the visual, aural aspects of the performer help to frame the minds or perception of the audience to create a certain complicity or agreement between the performer and the audience. It gives rise to the idea that to assume an identity, one must first look the part (whatever ‘looking the part’ might mean to different people⁹⁰).

But while such imitation is often the first step we take as beginners, Zeami adds also that it is merely the Function and not the Substance of the performance. Nogami states that “there are two pivotal ideas which make the basis of Zeami’s theory of art: *monomane* (the technique of imitation) and *yūgen* (the technique of expressing the profundity of sentiment)” (1973:35). To *imitate* is to copy with accuracy in a detached and objectified manner. To *become* however is to assimilate the role, the technique into our selves, such that our actions are “a stream of consciousness that never slackens” (Yamazaki, 1984:xxxix-xl) and we throw ourselves into the stream to be carried along by it.

⁹⁰Going back to the question I asked in the Preface about my “Chinese-ness”, to non-Chinese people I certainly would look the part by virtue of my physical appearance alone. However to other Chinese, “looking the part” may consist of more factors beyond my physical appearance.

To properly understand Zeami's argument about imitation, we should know that he "recognises two types of 'imitation'. One is 'style without mastery'; the other type of 'imitation' is an imitation of the 'style with mastery'" (Nagatomo, 1981:404). For Zeami "style without mastery" is simply the acquisition of bodily techniques that he sees as the basis of all training (much like Dōgen). As Nagatomo tells us, such thinking is in line with

"the essential meaning of Zen cultivation [which] consists of the conformation of an individual to a particular bodily 'form', whether it pertains to seated meditation or to daily activities prescribed by monastic rules. The underlying assumption is that one learns to correct one's mode of consciousness⁹¹ first by assuming a certain bodily 'form'" (1981:407).

In relation to modern methods of training (particularly with regards to dance), focus on learning the proper technique serves both a pragmatic as well as a socialising function. Physical arts such as dance have over time become more athletic and physically demanding. Practices such as warming up and learning to execute the technique properly prevent injury to the dancer. But the warm up period serves not only the functional purpose of preparing the body but also of framing the mind for the task ahead.

Moreover, it is only when body and mind are working in harmony that we can attain "imitation with mastery". When body and mind function in harmony, we are then freed to establish a similar harmony with our environment. Consequently, we see that observation leads to imitation and experience allows us to use our judgement as to the suitability or kind of performance required. As Zeami wrote,

⁹¹ It should be noted that such "corrections" are generally culturally determined.

“to see with the spirit is to grasp the Substance; to see with the eyes is merely to observe the Function. Thus it is that beginning actors merely grasp the Function and try to imitate that. Although they do not understand the real principle Function [that is, the fact that it derives from Substance], they attempt to copy it. Yet Function cannot be imitated. Those who truly understand the Nō, since they grasp it with their spirit, are able to imitate its substance” (Zeami, 1984:71).

As such, Zeami purports that one cannot (to return to an earlier example) play the part of a woman without first looking, behaving and thinking like one. But it is not enough to look, behave and think like a woman to be regarded as one. Would, after all, a Caucasian woman who dyes her hair black, dons a *qipao* and understands Chinese culture be considered a Chinese woman? Likewise, despite my Chinese descent and practice of some Chinese customs, I would not be regarded by some Chinese people as being Chinese enough. On the other hand, most non-Chinese would accept my ethnic identity without question based on my appearance alone. It would appear then that the Substance of performance is an intangible that must be negotiated (through the acceptable markers of Function) with its audience. Substance is therefore something the performer must be able to share with his/her audience and not keep for his/her own pleasure. Substance goes beyond simply being the capacity for expressive performance but encompasses the ability to communicate expression and meaning *to* an audience.

This concept forestalls the development of a slavish obsession with technique and too much attention to historical accuracy or any single facet in performance. It also permits change, negotiation and re-negotiation with other selves to facilitate communication in different moments in space and time. After all, performance, for

Zeami, is first and foremost for the appreciation of the audience. A great devotion to technique does not assure an appreciative response from the audience; have we not all seen technically masterful performances that have left us cold? Nor is a performance of great substance and import of any significance to an audience if it “talks” above, beyond and also beneath their comprehension and appreciation. To this end, Zeami writes in his treatises that

“in the case of those spectators who have real knowledge and understanding of the *Nō*, there will be an implicit understanding between them and the actor... Yet in the case of the dull-witted audience, or the vulgar audiences in the countryside or in the far-off provinces... if the level of the performance is too demanding, the actor will fail to obtain the praise of his spectators. Therefore, an actor should remember the easy style of performance he used when a beginner, and when the location or the occasion demands, and the level of the audience is low, the actor should strive to bring happiness to them by performing in a style which they truly can appreciate. When one thinks over the real purposes of our art, a player who truly can bring happiness to his audiences is one who can without censure bring his art to all” (1984:41).

Performance must consequently be understood as a living thing whose “only life is in the present” (Phelan, 1993:146). As performance is always changing, Zeami requires the mature actor⁹² to have “an ability to gauge the potential of the moment, a feeling for the pace of a work and each of its components, and a respect for the taste of the common people as well as that of the elite” (Blenmen-Hare, 1986:24) in addition to his/her technical repertoire. The capacity for detached vision produces what is

⁹² Or rather one who has found “the flower that does not fade” (Zeami, 1984:53).

referred to as a “mirror-like awareness⁹³” of self whereby the performer can “see” him/herself as the audience sees him/her (Zeami, 1984). As if dancing in front of the mirror of our consciousness⁹⁴, the performer is able to respond to the audiences’ perception and make any required adjustments to suit the audience.

Zeami teaches also that Substance and Function can be acquired through conscious training and cultivation and be perfected in progressive stages of development. In *Kyūi*, Zeami lists nine levels in the progressive development of the performer, the ninth being the lowest and the first the highest. The ninth through to the seventh levels of development are levels at which we see in the performer displays of raw talent. The technique is mechanical, perfunctory and executed without real understanding of it or any effect it may have. Performances are often unreserved and energetic but any seemingly inspired moment is more likely to be accidental rather than intentional. The performer at these levels has

“no awareness that performance may involve anything beyond what is innate to him... his performance would be limited to the activities familiar to him in his everyday life... and so would not differentiate between his customary behaviour and performed behaviour” (Nearman, 1978:308).

This to me is most descriptive of young dance students who (blessed with physiques and personalities ideally suited to dance) may display a great potential for their art. On speaking to them however, one discovers that whatever technique they may

⁹³ The mirror-like awareness seems something of a paradox in the concept of flow or being (where consciousness and action are one and the same). I would propose instead that this mirror-like awareness is not paradoxical to being but is an example of how being must include an awareness of one’s surroundings and not just one’s self. Without a mirror-like awareness of one’s surroundings and the ability to adjust our performances to suit these surroundings, being would be nothing more than narcissistic self indulgence that in not of the lived world; a concept that runs through Sōtō Zen Buddhist theory as well as Zeami’s theory of performance.

⁹⁴ Keeping in mind here that consciousness is not a purely mental phenomenon.

possess is purely accidental and on closer scrutiny one may even discover inadequacies in their technique, which, until corrected, will hinder further progress. This is, as Zeami might have said, merely a physical modality and lacking in true Substance. Their idea of presentation of a dance is also often limited to smiles, pouts and other expressively superficial gestures that children may have instinctively developed by this stage.

Beyond this, however, they are often unable to express more complex and intense characters or emotions that are outside the scope of their experience or these expressions. If attempted, these performances often become caricatures, copies of what the dancers may have seen someone else do but without the accompanying emotional depth. As Nearman observes, these are the

“basic qualities found in ‘natural’ performers, those without training [or limited training] who rely primarily on what spontaneously arises or whose understanding of acting is partial and unsophisticated” (1978:307).

However, people are often charmed with these ingenuous performers because the vibrancy of their youth makes their performances acceptable and even commendable, in that particular time and place.

The middle levels of development marks the growth of the individual’s awareness as a performer. The main forces in this growth are the acquisition and accumulation of technical knowledge and skill as well as the increased experience and maturity of the performer. At the lowest level of this group,

“the student’s attempts to mimic the teacher develop his powers of observation and his ability to reproduce behaviour while he absorbs elements of stage

decorum. For Zeami, this superficial mimicry is the usual way in which humans learn and is therefore the path that the student is to follow if he is to develop as an actor” (Nearman, 1978:314).

While one may argue that the actions of the previous levels are also produced from the student’s ability to imitate, what sets this level apart from the preceding levels is that the imitation is more intentional. The student studies the form of the teacher, or a similar role model, and makes a conscious effort to learn and copy it. With more conscious absorption of formal training, less of the resulting technique and character portrayal in the student’s performance is left to chance. Instead, conscious effort is put into making what happens on stage happen. The highest level of this group marks “the blossoming of genuine creativity in the actor” (Nearman, 1978:317). The performer is now able to summon at will the raw energy he/she first displayed at the lower levels and intentionally channel them towards his/her performance. This results in a “‘controlled spontaneity’, that permits the Fourth Level actor to produce sustained theatrical effects that are radiant and vivid” (Nearman, 1978:317). For Zeami, the Fourth Level also marks the end of the performer’s formal training (i.e. actually having a teacher one learns from)⁹⁵ and must proceed through to the next levels by way of experience, exploration and (most importantly for Zeami) assimilation.

The three upper levels of a performer’s progression deal mostly with assimilation of technical knowledge and the kind of knowledge one can only gain through experience. As the performer’s ability progresses, less physical energy and

⁹⁵ We should note here that “Zeami shares with his contemporaries and with many present-day Japanese teachers of performing arts the idea that the master teacher’s work does not cease with genuine blossoming of the student’s creativity. The developing actor will still need throughout his career the perceptiveness, guidance and advice of a master to confirm his continued growth” (Nearman, 1978:319). Hence the Fourth Level also marks a change in the teacher’s role (whereby one instructs, corrects and disciplines) to that of a mentor who offers advice.

intent are directed into his/her exertions. Eventually, the performer arrives at a stage where

“he has completely digested his artistic skills through repeated and through training and rehearsals, thus integrating his mind and body so that dramatic effects appear almost automatically or spontaneously” (Yamazaki, 1984:xxxv).

This supports Zeami’s belief that “if hidden, acting shows the Flower; if unhidden, it cannot” (Zeami as cited by Yamazaki, 1984:xxxiv). Hence, performance must arise spontaneously even to the performer in order to produce Novelty. At its peak, “actor, art, technique, beauty, meaning are no longer discernible because they are no longer separable” (Nearman, 1978:325). In order to make sense of Zeami’s view, we must understand that Function is not so much the perfection of technique and characterisation⁹⁶, as the complete assimilation of technique and characterisation so that all that the performer does seems appropriate and perfect. As such, Zeami writes that

“if a truly superior actor no longer has fears about any possible faults that may lie beyond the bounds of his own sense of himself, he will be able to act in any kind of performance with ease and confidence. His art may be unorthodox, yet it will nevertheless be enjoyable, lying as it does outside the real of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’; his accomplishment may be described as that art that exists when ‘Emptiness is no other than Form’. As his errors themselves are effective, they can no longer be termed errors” (1984:116).

⁹⁶ To divide the sum of a performance in these two categories is somewhat crude but helps our more conventional understanding of performance.

Consequently, what we imitate evolves from mere outward appearances to the intangible and yet defining quality of the role, which also encompasses its outward appearance. In other words, the performance of a mature actor is not just about technique or expression; it is about *performing*, being in the moment, which incidentally includes technique and expression amongst its many qualities.

However, this development of performance skills detailed by Zeami is also but one aspect of the nature of the act of performance. Performance is itself not a static entity nor is it discrete from or above the nuances of the life-world. As many performance theorists (Auslander (1992), Carlson (1996), Conquergood (1995), Diamond (1996), Grehan (1998) and Phelan (1992), to name a few) have pointed out time and again, there are many differing views on what is performance and its place and purpose in society. Grehan, for instance, writes that

“performance constantly morphs from form to form, from event to event. It is eclectic and fluid: given its complexity, it is not surprisingly that attempting to engage theoretically with performance seems not only difficult but at times antithetical to its aims⁹⁷” (1998:15).

Despite Grehan’s claim, she and a host of other performance theorists actively engage with the subject, attempting to formulate ideas and explanations of the amorphous in order to advance our understanding.

As I proceed in this study of the self, I too find it necessary to step from Zeami to modern performance studies, to graduate from the study of the process of

⁹⁷ It should be noted though that the “aims” of performance are highly debatable. While some see it as form of entertainment, there are others who regard performance as a marginal, contestable art form and/or mode of expression. Hence just what the “aims” of performance are is just as complex as the definition of performance itself.

performance to an understanding of performance as a way of being in and making a relationship with the life-world. In so doing, we move, in the next chapter, from the use of theatrical performance as an analogy for the performance of self to an understanding of the self that is performed in theatre and dance; a self that is itself always part of a larger social and cultural formation. I will examine popular and academic understandings of performance and show how performance studies can contribute to our attempt at developing a philosophy of self. A philosophy of the self that, being based in the moment of performance, is necessarily changeable and therefore continually being recreated. As such, I will also take on the issue of transcendence or the attainment of a transcendent self, situated within a social and cultural context. This transcendent self is to some extent necessarily determined by what is deemed acceptable in our social and cultural appreciation of aesthetics and the way in which we direct our energies in our performances of self.

How Do I Perform Myself?

From the preceding chapters, we are beginning to develop an understanding of self that is not static and that only comes into being through its being lived, experienced or performed. The performance of this self occurs in a world filled, materially, intellectually and emotionally, with objects that help shape our experience and being in this world. Through both Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological study of physical processes, the Buddhist search for enlightenment and Zeami's Buddhism based philosophy of performance, we see that there are different stages of being that are developed over time through conscientious practice, learning and experience. Moreover, because the self is not a static entity, these stages are dynamic and require consistent practice, learning and experiencing in order to achieve a higher, transcendent sense of self. What then is this transcendent self?

When we think of transcendence⁹⁸, we often think of moving beyond our material selves, our situation in the life-world or of becoming someone or something better (or other) than what we already are. The popular perception in Christian doctrine (as well as other religions of the world) certainly appears to support this idea, centred as it is on the transcendence of the spirit into a higher realm. As religion often forms a significant influence on social theories and perceptions, it is not surprising that many polarised views on the role of the body in the transcendent self have developed over time. It is also not surprising then that our understanding of transcendence falls in with notions of escaping or superseding the boundaries and "natural" or "everyday" abilities and habits of the human body, whether through sport

⁹⁸ "We shall give the name 'transcendence' to this act in which existence takes up, to its own account, and transforms such a situation, Precisely because it is transcendence, existence never utterly outruns anything, for in that case the tension which is essential to it would disappear. It never abandons itself. What it is never remains external and accidental to it, since this is always taken up and integrated into it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945:196).

(for example), or in the spiritual sense as in the transcendence of the spirit or soul(from the material world).

While much of what has been said about transcendence in literature, philosophy and theology⁹⁹ has often been interpreted as the transcendence of the human spirit or eternal soul from the “baseness” of the human body, comparatively little is overtly said about our transcendence or emergence from the other aspects of our life. This is ironic when we consider how commonplace social, historical and cultural transcendence is when we look at our everyday discourse, particularly when we talk of how an individual may have attained success *despite* coming from a disadvantaged background. For instance, we are all familiar with stories of individuals who overcome a physical disability or illness to become a successful sports person, or the individual from an impoverished family who later becomes a wealthy professional. Transcendence, in this sense, is not only far more commonplace than the traditional sense of the word, but also exists in a far greater variety¹⁰⁰.

In this section, my discussion on the issue of transcendence will be largely based on two key points in Merleau-Ponty’s chapter on freedom in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. It is my intention to support and clarify his arguments about the possibility of the everyday-ness of transcendence with theories drawn from Zen Buddhism (specifically Sōtō Zen) as well as Zeami’s theories on performance. Although linking Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of freedom to transcendence may be unconventional in the traditional sense of that word¹⁰¹ (since it is more of a socio-

⁹⁹Kant, Sarte and Husserl are just some philosophers who have delved into an examination of the concept of transcendence. Transcendence is also discussed in Christian theology and Buddhist philosophy.

¹⁰⁰While some may feel that comparing worldly success with philosophical transcendence generalizes the notion of transcendence and therefore reduces the usefulness of the comparison, I think the point here is to adopt the Sōtō Zen position that we all can achieve little moments of transcendence in our experience of our daily world and that transcendence is in fact be grounded in both our worldly and not-so-worldly experiences.

¹⁰¹ That is, the spirit transcending the body or the achievement of some other-worldly goal.

political statement developed from his interest in Marxism), I believe it is still appropriate in view of the horizons we are exploring with regards to the phenomenal self. As Smith (1999) points out, transcendence is not a key word in Merleau-Ponty's work. I am however choosing to link his ideas about freedom and *dépassement sur place* with the enlightenment of Zen Buddhism by adopting the Husserlian concept of "transcendence in immanence", which I define as a transcendence which is based in the lived body. This concept attempts to avoid the duality of transcendence and immanence as qualities existing on their own while acknowledging the historical meanings of both, which I feel are conceptually important to the understanding of where and how the lived body belongs in this debate and connects the four (*dépassement sur place*, freedom, enlightenment and transcendence in immanence) together. It also opens the door to that possibility that such freedom, enlightenment or transcendence is achievable in the here and now as opposed to some distant space and time.

In Merleau-Ponty's discussion of freedom in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, there is an objection to the seemingly commonplace notion of transcendence as our capacity to move beyond one's already existing sphere. In reading this text, what I find significant are two points: firstly, his arguments against existing theories of absolute freedom in favour of conditional freedom; and, secondly, that his discussion of freedom does not focus on the corporeal body, but on the lived self, situated in a physical, social, cultural and historical sphere. These two points are encapsulated in his statement that

"at the outset, I am not an individual beyond class, I am situated in a social environment, and my freedom, though it may have the power to commit me

elsewhere, has not the power to transform me instantaneously into what I decide to be” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963:447).

From this, we are not only informed of Merleau-Ponty’s view with regards to freedom and the nature of freedom, but we are also made aware that this freedom is not an escape from the physical world. Instead, the nature of freedom is very much dependent on the nature of our phenomenal existence. Consequently, just as Merleau-Ponty questions objectivist and intellectualist notions of self, his discussion of freedom can be read as a challenge to their understanding of transcendence and our capacity for such enlightened experience.

Situating the transcendent self in the here and now

As we have already explored in the previous two chapters, the corporeal and the immaterial are indivisible aspects of the human self. Therefore, perceptions of the transcendent self as beyond body, beyond our situation in the life world implies that it is also beyond the human. While this may agree with the philosophy of intellectualism, it runs contrary to the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Zen, which maintain that there is nothing beyond the human condition. As such, transcendence “designates the passage, not to the superhuman... but to the fully human” (Smith, 1999: 36). Thus both phenomenology and Zen Buddhism contend that the transcendent self not only retains its phenomenal, human aspects, it is centred on these conditions. This is seen in the meditative practices of practitioners of the Sōtō sect of Zen Buddhism, for whom transcendence is not sought through the practice of special activities but the daily practice of everyday life.

Why is it so important to try to situate transcendence in the everyday? In exploring the peak or transcendent experiences of professional dancers, Hefferon and

Ollis (2006) examine the conditions necessary for these dancers to reach the state of flow¹⁰². Their reason for conducting this research is to enable professional dancers, artistic directors and choreographers to develop a better understanding of how dancers can be empowered to perform consistently at an optimal level which they describe as a time where “there is no psychic energy available to criticise, fear or analyse the ‘self’” (143). To answer my first question, we must ask ourselves why this optimal, transcendent experience should not be considered an experience of being fully human(as opposed to being superhuman). We must ask ourselves also if this experience should be limited to moments when we engage in specialised practices such as meditation or dance or if we should actually endeavour to discover optimal, transcendent experience in every aspect of our lives. Just as a dancer loses the distinction between him/herself and the dance when in an optimal, transcendent state, do we not become more fully ourselves when we do no longer stand apart, criticising, fearing or analysing ourselves and what we do?

To understand the everyday kind of transcendence that emerges from both Zen Buddhism and Merleau-Ponty, it is necessary to rethink our perception of transcendence. We come into a world where there are already pre-existing meanings and structures, be they of a physical, social, cultural or historical nature. While it may be within our power to challenge, change or ignore these meanings and structures, we cannot deny them or the impact that they have on what we think it means to function optimally or transcendentally. Therefore, the way in which we live our lives, the choices we make, the understanding we have of who we are and our subsequent capacity to not criticise, fear or analyse and just be (transcendent) is neither pre-determined (i.e. causal, as objectivism proposes) nor is it absolutely free or open to

¹⁰² Flow is defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as the state of optimum function; in other words a state of transcendence.

our will (as is the claim of intellectualism). Rather, it is ambiguous, and it is in Merleau-Ponty's work on the nature of freedom that ambiguity of the lived experience is elucidated. Therefore when trying to attain the transcendent self, it is perhaps necessary to acknowledge (and maybe even embrace) this ambiguity.

There are three characteristics that define Merleau-Ponty's notion of freedom. The first (which I have already mentioned) is that we live in a world where pre-existing laws (natural or otherwise) govern our actions and behaviour. This is of significance to the concept of freedom for

“if freedom is to have room in which to move, if it is to be describable as freedom, there must be something to hold it away from its objectives, it must have a field, which means that there must be for it special possibilities, or realities which tend to cling to being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963:438).

Practitioners of Sōtō Zen suggest that this field – this “something to hold it [freedom] away from its objectives – need not be a limit or an obstacle that we need to overcome. Instead, this field is the everyday life (physical and social) that each of us experiences. Similarly, what we consider to be transcendence – an achievement of these “special possibilities”; something new and spectacular or going beyond existing circumstances – apparently makes transcendence unattainable for the majority of us.

As we have argued previously, through the teachings of Zen Buddhism and the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, and, as we shall further argue in further into this chapter, the transcendent need not be unique or special to the world at large. It is easy to recognise and regard the unique as transcendent and sublime. It is sometimes harder to understand that the common, every day or conventional can also provide the same transcendent effect.

“I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style. All my actions and thoughts stand in a relation to this structure... The fact remains that I am free, not in spite of, or on the hither side of, these motivations, but by means of them. For this significant life, this certain significance of nature and history which I am, does not limit my access to the world, but on the contrary is my means of entering into communication with it. It is by what I am at present that I have a chance of moving forward” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:455-456).

In a similar vein, Sōtō Zen instructs on the possibility of attaining transcendence through the conscious practice of everyday activities.

The basis of this possibility is to acknowledge that we have no control over what already is but we do have some influence over what may be. As Fraleigh writes, “the will is not imperial; it is constantly sinking back into nature” (1987:20). Just because we desire something does not mean it will happen. Instead, our task is to continually negotiate alternative ways and means to attain our goals. Thus while we may still be incapable of flying as birds do, we have developed technologies through which we defy the laws of gravity. This brings us to the second condition to Merleau-Ponty’s definition of freedom: while we may exist in a world with pre-given laws, they are by no means absolutely binding. Moreover, it seems part of our course in life to pursue and explore the limits of our freedom and the different avenues by which we can alter or transcend our ‘reality’.

The perception of freedom and limitations

Even before the success of the Wright brothers, human beings have long tried to defy the laws of gravity. Over time, we have developed engines powerful enough to escape the pull of gravity and machines that can eliminate gravity within a limited area. We have also trained and developed our bodies (whether through hard work or the consumption of drugs) so that we can leap farther and jump higher. Although there are restrictions to what we can do and how we do them, “my body is not determined by my limitations. Rather, I create my body through my choices and my actions, in this I also create myself” (Fraleigh, 1987:17).

Thus, while there may be limitations to what we can do our actual course of action is essentially our decision. For instance, while it is the choice of some to use and develop engines to help them fly, it is the choice of others to design “wings” that help them glide on the wind’s currents. Moreover, what we choose to do with ourselves helps in determining the shape of our physical and cultural realities. For instance, it is the common perception that all ballet dancers must have very flexible bodies. If you were to speak to any dancer however, you would find that flexibility (for most people) is something they work at to attain and maintain and not necessarily something that is “natural” to them.

Just as there are individuals willing to work at and overcome the obstacles presented by their apparent lack of flexibility, there are also those to whom flexibility is not an issue they give much thought to. Similarly (to return to the subject of our initial illustration), there is also a portion of the population for whom gravity presents no challenge. Some have no interest in the mysteries of flight; others even celebrate our groundedness, our “natural” state (as they do in modern dance). This is the third

point of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy: that things are not obstacles unless we perceive them to be so.

“It is, therefore, freedom which brings into being the obstacles to freedom, so that the latter can be set against it as it bounds... My freedom, then, does not so contrive it that this way there is an obstacle, and that way a way through, it arranges for there to be obstacles and ways through in general; it does not draw the particular outline of this world, but merely lays down its general structures... We cannot distinguish the quality of ‘obstacle’ from the obstacle itself, and relate one to freedom and the other to the world in itself which, without freedom, would be merely an amorphous and unnameable mass. It is not therefore, outside myself that I am able to find a limit to my freedom” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963:439).

Thus, what freedom is and where it may lie exists in our perception of things. To one person, gravity may be something to free oneself from. To another, it may not be an issue and to yet another, it presents a base from which to dream up new ideas and technologies. The nature of freedom, therefore, is such that it is only significant for those who perceive the field of potentials and obstacles around it, the paradigms or choices available. Without this perceived field (which, physical, cultural, social or historical, is real for me only because I perceive it) there is nothing from which I can distinguish it from all else around me and hence free myself. And still, because I do not live in a world absent of physical, cultural, social and historical structures, I can and do apprehend fields of “reality” around me. Thus selecting my paradigm in life, I then proceed to map my way through these fields. It is, therefore, through the power of my perception that I create my own freedoms and limitations.

Similarly, the challenge any dance style or form presents to a choreographer is how to express and represent ideas and images within the constraints of the style. That is, how to create a dance that is effective, original and yet conforms to ideas of what is, in this case, ballet. Early this century, a group of dancers and choreographers decided that the rules set by the classical style were too restrictive and were non-representative of modern day life. They went on to create what is now known as modern dance, which functions as an antithesis of ballet¹⁰³. From this beginning, the trend has continued and we now have experienced neo-classical ballet (as typified by George Balanchine), which sought to revive and rejuvenate the classical style. We also have the contemporary style which, while based on classical training, features a freer range of movement.

While watching a screening of Meryl Tankard's *The Deep End*, it suddenly occurred to me how far our concept of dance, particularly the classical¹⁰⁴ style has developed. *The Deep End* is a short ballet choreographed in 1996 by Meryl Tankard for the Australian Ballet, this country's largest and most established classical company. While this ballet may not, for the most part, be what would immediately spring to mind when one thinks of the classical tradition and classical ballet companies, it is certainly representative of a trend in classical dance that has been emerging since early this century.

But the point in all this is, firstly, that given an existing situation (e.g. classical dance) people can and do respond differently to the challenges they may or may not perceive. That the classical ballet technique still exists today in a relatively unchanged form suggests that some dancers and choreographers still find that traditional style

¹⁰³ Where classical ballet is a much stylised way of moving, proponents of modern dance attempted to make modern dance movement more "natural".

¹⁰⁴ For the purposes of this section, the terms classical style, dance, etc. refer to classical ballet.

relevant¹⁰⁵. Secondly, that *Deep End* was performed by a classical company and that similar pieces are becoming something of the norm in the repertoire of many classical companies also suggest that our perception of what is ballet is also changing.

Through the development of Western theatrical dance in this century, we can observe the unfolding of the three characteristics of freedom. At the beginning of the century, Western theatrical dance consisted mostly of classical ballet with its well-established principles on style and aesthetics. While some people were content to work within the limits of this tradition, others broke away from the principles of classical style. Of these, some, like Isadora Duncan, chose to discard these principles and create new ones that were often the antithesis of classical style. Others, such as Balanchine, chose to extend the limits of classical style, retaining its main features (such as the turn out and the feeling of lift and stretch) while at the same time adding or taking away other aspects. Balanchine, for instance, made it a far more athletic dance form than it was previously. He is also largely responsible for creating the modern (one might even say fetishized) “look”¹⁰⁶ of the tall, slender and long-legged female dancer¹⁰⁷.

Susan Leigh Foster explores this development in her book *Reading Dancing*. In her first chapter, she examines the styles and philosophies of Deborah Hay, George Balanchine, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, four dancer/choreographers who lived and worked mainly in America this century. At the beginning of the chapter, Foster describes their work as “*paradigmatic* [my emphasis] types in

¹⁰⁵ In a recent article, Ann Daly (1997) accuses choreographers such as Twyla Tharp who use classical movements and vocabulary in the training of their dancers and their choreography as being not sufficiently interrogative as the tradition of post-modern dance should be. I would suggest instead that such applications of classical technique *are* interrogative in that they re-situate and hence re-interpret classical movement in the lexicon of dance movement.

¹⁰⁶ L.M. Vincent (*Competing with the Sylph: Dancers and the Pursuit of the Ideal Body*), Suzanne Gordon (*Off Balance: The Real World of Ballet*).

¹⁰⁷ Female dancers previously tended to be petite, supposedly making them easier for their male partners to lift and look suitably masculine when standing next to them. If we go back to early in the century, we would find that dancers at that time would be considered stocky by today’s standards.

American concert dance” (1986:1). This is an interesting description considering how varied and diverse the works of these dancer/choreographers are; a variety and diversity that Foster herself acknowledges and explores in her text.

Although all four worked in different decades of this century, it is nonetheless interesting to see, when confronted with the human body, dance and the various social, cultural and historical significances that surround it, how different individuals respond: that is, how they develop diverse theories on dance movement and philosophy, seemingly selecting this and disregarding that, making one feature more important; or agreeing with popular convention. Thus it would seem that our freedom, the limits to it and our capacity to transcend them are all perceptive. Out of a multitude of possibilities¹⁰⁸ we make our choices, give them meaning based on perceived “realities” (thus validating these choices) and create a way or style of dancing that satisfies our desires.

For the purpose of analysis and illustration of the limitations and freedoms available in the construction of dance movement, I would now like to examine Meryl Tankard’s *The Deep End*. There are several reasons why I have chosen to study this dance instead of further examining Foster’s text. For one, I am not well acquainted with much of the work (particularly that of Deborah Hay) she discusses in the text. For another, the works that Foster has chosen to study are not only choreographed by different individuals, they have also been created in different decades (with some overlap). In the tradition of scientific research, this would be regarded as having too many variables to make a definitive statement on the issue at hand. Moreover, having also gone to some length to demonstrate that individuals do perceive and experience

¹⁰⁸ And the sheer diversity of dance proves that there is a multitude of possibilities.

situations differently, it seems more constructive for me to reduce the number of variables by studying one dance produced by the one person.

The Deep End is choreographed around a water theme. Its choreographer Meryl Tankard says in an interview (1996) that her intent was to explore the different levels of the deep end of a pool; its surface and its depths. Although some of the scenes portrayed may be better associated with the sea, our interest here is to study the way in which Tankard chooses to depict these activities through movement.

As a classically trained dancer herself, Tankard is not unfamiliar with classical technique and the way in which classical dancers move. As a choreographer and an artistic director, however, she has departed somewhat from her classical training to embrace and develop a contemporary style of movement. It is not surprising therefore that she chooses to choreograph what is essentially a contemporary piece with some of the hallmarks (or a play on these hallmarks) of the classical style for a group of classical dancers.

The opening sequence of the piece depicts a group of poolside party goers dressed in street clothes and dancing to a latin-esque rhythm. The dancers perform on a platform suspended above the stage. With their heads shrouded in darkness, the emphasis falls on their lower bodies. This gives the audience the impression of watching the dancers from below, as if sitting in the pool.

After several minutes of this, one of the dancers “falls” into the pool. This dancer’s fall and subsequent struggles to surface as well as the entry and efforts of her would-be rescuer are all performed with the aid of wires suspended from the ceiling. The drowning girl’s feet never make contact with the stage, creating the buoyant feeling when one moves, floats or swims in water. Her movements are wild and

uncontrolled, seemingly devoid of direction and very unlike the deliberate intent we conventionally associate with dance movement.

The next segment depicts (first through a *pas de trois* then a solo) four scuba divers, again suspended by wires. Unlike the frantic movements of the drowning girl however, their movements are more controlled and less determined by whichever stagehand controls the movement of those wires. They occasionally make contact with the floor, mainly to help propel themselves into the next movement. The classical turned-out *plie* occasionally used here not only mimics a frog or breaststroke-like kick in the water but also plays on a characteristic move of classical training.

The third set focuses on the activities of a quartet of underwater creatures. The ubiquitous pointe shoe makes its first appearance here in the dance. There is a particular emphasis on the use of arms to mimic the motion of the creatures' fins. I would suggest too that this segment is more like conventional dance in the sense that the range of movement performed falls within the limits of what the human body is capable of without the external aid of wires¹⁰⁹. The focus of the dance action is also on the stage (making it level with the audiences' view) instead of being suspended several feet off the stage floor.

The final scene depicts the various antics of a group of swimmers in a pool. This is probably the most classical of all the sections in the piece. Pointe shoes are used again with dancers moving across the stage as they would if they were doing laps across the pool. At one point during this segment, the music stops and one dancer asks: "*Miss Tankard, do you want us to move across the stage like dancers or just normal people?*" After this statement, the pointe shoes disappear as the technique

¹⁰⁹ For a female classical dancer her pointe shoes are as much a part of herself as are her arms and legs.

becomes increasingly less classical. The section ends with three couples, the women suspended by wires, performing a *pas de deux* of sorts in the pool. Although the carriage of bodies and general feel of the movements are classical in style, the traditional lifts are again assisted by wires.

There is undoubtedly a play with notions of classical and non-classical style in this dance, not only in the movements executed but in the staging and set design as well. This play of concepts appears to guide the choice of movement for the various sections in the piece. While the theme of swimming or moving through water remains constant, the dance moves from what may not conventionally be regarded as dance (i.e., the frantic flailing of a woman suspended by wires), to the more conventional (the underwater creatures and the swimmers) and then finishing with a combination of the two (the trio of couples).

One could argue that the choice of device suited the desired effect of each section (such as the lack of control of a drowning woman). However, similar ideas can be - and no doubt have been - danced without the use of such devices. Certainly in this piece alone, we have seen people “swimming” with and without the use of wires to equal effect. Therefore, there exists in choreography choices for the choreographer to make; choices that (like the use of arms to depict fins for instance) need not be at all inevitable if one is willing to expand our perceptions of what is dance. The principles of classical dance and the conventional perceptions of what is dance have served to shape the choreography of this particular example of dance as it worked both with and against these existing ideas. While some devices in the dance transcend the limits of human movement, others transcend the obstacles of conventional dance form. Certainly the use of wires creates buoyancy in movement not otherwise possible without water. That these varied choices can be used to the same transcendent

effect¹¹⁰, also show us that the transcendent need not be paradigmatic; nor is the paradigmatic necessarily transcendent. We are as free and transcendent when we create new paradigms as we are when we revive and reuse existing ones. Thus, it is not the content but the manner of delivery or the performance that is important in attaining transcendence.

While the transcendent self can be found via the performance of ordinary activities, Zen does emphasise that they must be performed *consciously*; that is, not in a thoughtlessly habitual or instinctive manner. Zen practice requires that we focus on our actions, concentrating solely on them and not permitting ourselves to drift from or reflect on the execution of the action at hand¹¹¹. Often using breathing as the initial action of focus, we then expand our awareness to the other parts of our body. The result is an acute awareness of one's self that can eventually be expanded to encompass one's environment. In this sense, I need not be thinner, smarter, stronger, etc. to attain my transcendent self. I am already a transcendent self when I experience the moment as it is, investing myself in the action without holding back. Beyond this, there is no other trick or skill to learn and apply. It is when we hold on to those doubts and worries that so plague us all that we fail to realise our transcendent self. Thus the transcendent self is simply the self that is aware of its actions and it is this awareness which propels us forward.

Like the concept of Novelty¹¹² in Zeami's treatises, an experience need not be cathartic for it to be transcendent. We need not be brilliant in order to attain our transcendent self. As such, it is possible for us to embody the fullness of our identity,

¹¹⁰ The transcendent effect here being one in which the choreographer's creative vision is actualised and received by dancers and audiences. There is an acceptance that the performance has reached a certain sublime and is not seen as an unwieldy, superficial attempt at being different or creative.

¹¹¹ The phrase "Just Do It" (coined by Nike) is actually a very Zen concept.

¹¹² The Novel is the generation of something unique and special for the individual but not necessarily so for the world in general. It is therefore a very personal sort of occurrence.

of who we are, through the everyday performance of everyday activities. After all, it is through the everyday that we perform who we are. How else then should we arrive at the fullness of our identities? Even in dance, it is through practice of everyday (for the performer) exercises that he/she can achieve heightened, experience of transcendence in performance. One cannot become a virtuoso dancer without the daily slog of performing, mastering and re-mastering basic dance movements; of standing by the barre to perform the same *pliés* and *tendus* that every ballet student in the world performs. To do otherwise would be to attempt the proverbial “running before one learns to walk”.

Transcendent energies in the communication of identity

So how do we communicate this transcendent self to the people around us? How do we allow our transcendence to be made known to others through interaction? There clearly is a difference between the transcendent performance of an accomplished dancer and the kind of transcendence I might experience in the satisfaction of a good dance class. The transcendence I feel when I have done a good dance class is sometimes for myself alone. In this instance, it does not matter if anyone else witnesses this as I am my main focus in this context. When the need to communicate this experience to an audience arises¹¹³, there is a need to change the way one perceives one’s self (i.e. from that of self seeing self to other seeing self). Dancers on stage for instance, perform for the audience. In this situation, there is a shift in the focus of the dancer from merely experiencing the dance to creating a relationship by generating and sharing a certain energy with the audience through

¹¹³ To let people know who we are, what we want to communicate.

their performance. It becomes necessary therefore to ensure that their transcendence is more visible, more tangible to witnesses.

The difference between these heightened and mundane experiences of transcendence in performance lies in the performers' capacity to dilate (Barba, 1991) their energies, their presence, thus creating a different sort of intensity of experience or transcendence that allows for a shift of energies from one that is contained (transcendence at an everyday level) to one that is dispersed to an audience (a heightened form of transcendence).

But performances that have the power to affect those around them change with time and in different situations. For instance, our performances as children lose the power and impact they had when we become adults. Likewise, what we do on stage may appear exaggerated outside a theatrical performance. Thus, the attainment of transcendence is not merely the generation of a good, technical performance, but the appropriate use and direction of our internal and external sources of energy in a given situation. What is appropriate is in turn determined by the principles of particular self-cultivation methods as well as the perceptions of our cultural and physical environments. As such, there is a socio-historical component to transcendence, an issue we shall further address in the next chapter.

What does energy have to do with the formation of self and the communication of identity? I would argue that the three are closely connected issues and that the process of communication is one of energy exchange, whereby energy "spent" by one party is "received" by its communicating partner. Despite human reliance on verbal communication, much communication is still primarily non-verbal. A smile on my face as I say, "that was silly" gives the utterance different meaning to a

frown as I speak the same three words. Likewise a performer's body draped languidly on a bed as she beckons, "come closer" speaks differently to an audience when lying in a rigid pose.

As mentioned in my earlier references to the relationship between performers and their audience, there exists an exchange of energy between the two groups that facilitates the performance of being (be it in a performance on the theatrical stage or a performance in everyday life). In regards to this concept of energy exchange, I am now going to introduce the notion of *ki* that traditional East Asian medicine is based on and its implications for this thesis. Japanese and Chinese martial arts exponents believe that

"one's own flow of *ki* can be felt consciously directed within and around the body; it will normally influence the flow of *ki* in and around other people of things; and when powerfully developed it can strongly affect mental states and physical movement at a distance" (Payne, 1981:44-45).

This varying ability to effect change in the mental, emotional and physical states of other people and our social and physical environment is what distinguishes that which may be termed the everyday transcendent self from what we generally acknowledge as genius. More importantly, it is our capacity to summon and direct our *ki* at will that distinguish the heightened transcendence that communicates its energies from the mundane transcendence we try to cultivate in our daily experience.

For modern science, the study of energy has often been designated as the domain of physics. I still recall from my science lessons in school that energy was

rarely discussed in relation to the living, human body. Energy (as explained by modern science) is apparently not something we can perceive via our senses. Instead, what we can and do perceive are its resulting effects in perceivable objects. In school, the only time we looked at energy in relation to the human body was in order to calculate its mechanical value; that is, how much energy is required in order for a person to do something.

Moreover, as modern day philosopher Yuasa Yasuo (1989) notes, modern Western medicine initially developed its knowledge and practices from the study and dissection of corpses and the mapping of their anatomical structure, divorced from the understanding of the body's energy processes. It was only after this structural knowledge of the body was available that modern medicine went on to examine the function and operation of the various organs themselves. Yuasa observes that

“modern medicine was initially developed out of an understanding of anatomical ‘substance’, and then the physiological ‘function’¹¹⁴ was introduced and superimposed on this ‘substance’. In other words, the function of the body is assumed by virtue of the existence of sensible substance, so it follows that if there is no substance, there can be no function either” (1989:272).

By this argument, we know the heart pumps blood around the body because there is a heart that we can and have seen and touched through the dissection of the body. What this knowledge does not explain however is what differentiates the corpse from the living body, those energy processes which, although not visible, keep the heart pumping while the body is still alive and causes it to cease when absent from the

¹¹⁴ Anatomy studies the structure of the body. Hence a corpse is adequate for its purposes. Physiology on the other hand studies the function of the body, so a living body is required to understand how the various parts work to keep that body alive and well.

body. In effect, the living body was regarded as being comparable with a corpse, the difference between them seeming so inconsequential to the process of scientific research.

***Ki* energy, neural networks and the intentional arc**

For a long time this methodological approach left little room for the rationalisation of what is known as *ki* (in Japanese), *qi* or *chi* (in Chinese), the life or energy force central to the study and practice of traditional Japanese, Chinese and some other Eastern medicines. However the advent of defibrillators and pacemakers (and an increasing knowledge of atomic and sub-atomic particles) indicates an opening in modern medical research for this alternative approach to regarding and examining the human body. For example, it is now recognised that the human body carries electrical charges, which can be regarded as the modern medical equivalent of *ki* energy.

In addition to traditional medical practitioners, ancient and modern philosophers have also speculated on the nature of energy, its path within the individual body and the world at large, its capacities and its limits. Perhaps the greatest difference between the initial approach taken by modern medical science and that of these philosophers and Japanese and Chinese medical practitioners in the study of energy is the object of their examination. Where modern medical science often begins with a discrete, inanimate or non-living object, philosophers and medical practitioners from the Japanese, Buddhist, Taoist, Indian and phenomenological traditions choose to begin with the living body which is innately connected to its external world.

Traditional Eastern medical practices focus on the notion of energy (Japan: *ki*, China: *qi* or *chi*) flowing through and present only in the living body. Consequently, much traditional Eastern medical treatments are based on directing and re-directing the flow of this energy. Ancient practitioners have mapped out the course of this energy by denoting various meridians, power points through which energy flows in and out of and around the body. *Ki* energy is not a visible force¹¹⁵. As Barba explains, energy cannot simply be associated with the tangible product of a body in action. Instead, “it also refers to something intimate, something which pulses in immobility and silence, a retained power which flows in time without dispersing in space” (1991:81). Although some current research on *ki* energy uses the innate electro-potential of the body to trace the presence of *ki* in the body¹¹⁶, *ki* energy is not the same thing as electrical energy. Indeed, electrical charges are said to be symptomatic of the presence of *ki* rather than being *ki* itself. Otherwise we could quite possibly argue that all objects possess *ki*, as all objects can be positively or negatively charged.

According to ancient theorists on *ki*¹¹⁷, it is an energy force that affects not only the physiological but the psychological function of the individual as well. In fact, “the word for *ki* in different cultures usually carries implications of both ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’, linking the material and the immaterial” (Payne, 1981:44). Moreover, the flow of *ki* is said to change with our emotions, becoming more *yin* or more *yang*¹¹⁸ depending on the type of emotion we are experiencing. This, in turn, affects the physiological function of the body. Our emotional state, therefore, is innately connected to our physical wellbeing and vice versa.

¹¹⁵ Although there are some who say that people who are psychically attuned are able to “see” *ki* energy as an aura around us, perhaps like the infra-red energy that our bodies emit.

¹¹⁶ Yuasa cites some examples in *Science and Comparative Philosophy* (1989).

¹¹⁷ Yuasa cites *Yellow Emperor’s Manual*, an ancient Chinese medical text as his source.

¹¹⁸ This does not denote gender specificity, rather the positive or negative type of emotional energy. See later section for more discussion.

It is also for this reason that Japanese and Chinese medical practitioners have traditionally sought to direct or correct the flow of *ki* and to maintain the balance of *yin* and *yang* as a means for treating all ailments. This can be achieved through acupuncture or the ingestion of foods and herbs with the *yin* or *yang* force we are lacking. As such, “contemporary researchers have reasoned that the phenomena of *ki* is related to the autonomic nervous system and the internal secretions of the body” (Yuasa, 1989:270-271), both of which perform similar functions to those described above. Phenomenologists like Bergson (1911) and Merleau-Ponty (1963) have also theorised the existence of a body scheme with the same intermediary function as the meridian network of Japanese and Chinese medical theory. In his writings, Yuasa collectively terms these systems the “unconscious quasi-body”. He states that

“the system of ‘unconscious quasi-body’ is a potential system which mediates between the emotional function and the physiological function of the body, and establishes an interchange between the surface structure and the basal structure” (Yuasa, 1989:272).

Yuasa’s use of the word “unconscious” is appropriate in describing a system that does not function at the conscious level of the mind. It should, however, be noted that this is not a question of unthinking versus thinking action. The system is functional regardless of whether deliberate intent is present or absent in our action. In the chain of the network, the perception of the stimulating sensation and the resulting action may or may not be conscious but what happens in between occurs at the unconscious level. Were the links in this chain to all occur at a conscious level, it would require considerably more brainpower and would take far too much time to produce a

response¹¹⁹. This, in effect, is the process of non-thinking in action (previously discussed in Chapter Two) as illustrated by the network. It is also neither a physical nor mental function, hence Yuasa's use of the term "quasi-body" to describe its state of betweenness.

Although Yuasa uses the term "unconscious quasi-body" to describe models that have developed from both the phenomenological tradition and Eastern medical practices, it should be made clear that the models are not identical. Of particular interest to my discussion are Merleau-Ponty's body scheme and the ensuing research on neural networks and the meridian system of Eastern medical practice. Despite some similarities, the body scheme of phenomenology and the meridian network take different approaches to the subject and discuss and point towards different functional aspects of the human being in the world. It is important, therefore, to take note of these differences as they each make up for the deficiencies in the other.

We start with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model of the habitual body, which concentrates more on the habitualisation of behaviour that gives rise to the development of a behavioural pattern the individual refers to in order to function in the external world. This habitual body is a

"potential system that operates at the base of kinesthesia and that has the power to habitualize the functions of both the mind and the body in a definite pattern registered in memory" (Yuasa, 1989:275-276)

The habitual body is also intrinsically ambiguous. While it is based within the corporeal body, it is not separable from it, having no independent substance or existence. Instead, the habitual body

¹¹⁹ See Varela, Rosch and Thompson's discussion of cognitivism in *The Embodied Mind* (1993).

“is activated in order to form an existential and intentional arc, invisible and potential, towards the external world. Only when activated by the bodily scheme does the physiological body function as a lived body” (Yuasa, 1987:223).

Dreyfus (1996) argues that the existence of this intentional arc can be supported physiologically by current research into neural networks¹²⁰. He is certainly not alone in this belief, as the work of Merleau-Ponty has in recent years attracted the attention of cognitive scientists such as Varela, Rosch and Thompson¹²¹.

Dreyfus suggests the simulated neural network model, whereby the synapses of motor and sensory neurones¹²² are modified over time through practice to form a behavioural pathway, as being the most appropriate. Unlike previous models of cognitive function which rely on the presupposed retention of rules and symbols (i.e. representation, cause and effect) to explain cognitive function, the neural network model dismisses such claims in saying that specific memories are not stored. What is created and retained is a kind of map, the body scheme or quasi-body. The synapses that connect, say, sensory neurone A to motor neurone B¹²³ are strengthened with successive practice, creating routes to reach a desired point. It is rather like if one were to take the same route across a grassy field everyday: in time we would wear a pathway through that field.

The models of the neural network and the intentional arc work together to explain human behaviour and cognition in considerable cellular detail. It lends insight into the how of our learning and behavioural processes, mapping our physiological

¹²⁰ It should be noted that the neural network is not the intentional arc itself, rather the physiological function of it.

¹²¹ *The Embodied Mind* (1993) being one of the texts dealing with the topic.

¹²² Neurones are cells which carry impulses or messages to (sensory) and from (motor) the brain from the various organs in the body. The synapses are the connectors between each individual cell.

¹²³ This is a very simplistic example.

and psychological (or psychosomatic) functions. It is, however, my feeling that this detail is largely a mechanical model centred on the behavioural function of the individual and separate from its external world. Although Merleau-Ponty's theorisation of the body scheme supports the idea of the body and its functions being linked to the external world through the intentional arc, the nature of this interaction between two (or more) bodies, rather than their component parts, is not clearly defined. Hence, while Dreyfus' expansion of the body scheme with the neural network model distinctly elucidates the mechanics of human function and cognition on a microcosmic level, it fails to give similar attention to its macrocosmic aspect. The failure here lies in not going beyond the microcosmic, physiological details of neurones and cells to a more psychosomatic explanation. This is a task I believe the meridian system achieves with its focus on the concept of energy.

The meridian network is a system of energy flow through the body. The detection of this energy, *ki*, has traditionally been linked to the vascular system¹²⁴ and is usually depicted in Eastern medical diagrams in a similar manner. It is not, however, the same thing as the vascular system. For one, the vascular system is a physical substance, whereas the meridian network functions somewhere between the physical and the psychic. Thus, like the habitual body of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the actual existence of *ki* and the meridian network is difficult to prove; neither have an independent physical substance and what we can detect are often the symptoms of its presence rather than the thing itself. However, unlike the habitual body where we can effectively trace its formation through our lived experience of the learning process, the existence of the meridian network and the presence of *ki* in the living body are largely presupposed.

¹²⁴ Contemporary research, however, links it to electrical charges and alpha waves.

As a consequence, the exact physiological mechanics of the meridian network is still unclear. Eastern medical practitioners appear not to have been overly concerned with attaining the same physiological detail as modern scientists generally are. It is only with contemporary research on *ki* that we are gaining more knowledge on its physiological functions. Instead, traditional research on *ki* and the meridian network have tended to fall somewhere between science and mysticism, between the physiological and the psychic¹²⁵. This is what makes *ki* and the meridian network difficult to understand. At one level we appear to be discussing psychosomatic functions and effects, and certainly Eastern medicine does apply it in this manner. However, on another level, we appear to be dealing with a kind of psychic energy innate to the body. Yet it is this seemingly psychic or para-psychological aspect¹²⁶ of the meridian network that helps in explaining the relationship between the individual and its external world.

“*Ki*-energy while circulating in the interior of the body, is connected through the distal points of the limbs to the flow of *ki* in the outer world. We take the sensation of our own bodies, or whole state of coenesthesia, individually as ‘I’, but this ‘I’ intermingles with the outer world through the boundary of the skin. In short, the skin is a field making unique contact with the material world, within which an interchange takes place through the flow of *ki* between psychological and physiological functions, that is, between the mind and the body” (Yuasa, 1993:108).

¹²⁵ There are some claims that the psychically in-tuned can see *ki* as an aura of energy around each individual.

¹²⁶ I should make it clear here that I believe that what is commonly known as psychic energy is really part of the psychosomatic function of *ki*.

The premise that psychosomatic energy from the individual can intermingle and react with the external world should not be entirely mystical and implausible. Chinese medical practices have long held that an individual who has mastered the flow of *ki* through his/her body is able to transmit this energy through his/her fingers into the body of an afflicted person as a healing process¹²⁷. It is a truism of Western science that one form of energy can be passed from one body to another and converted from one form of energy into another. After all, if “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction”, why should it be impossible for the psychosomatic actions of the individual to produce a reaction as well? What we lack knowledge of at present is the exact science (that correlates with our lived experience) of how this transmission of energy occurs.

Our emotional response to a performance is a good example of how the *ki* energy from the performer might create a reaction. Emotion is essentially a psychosomatic response to a situation. When we say we are moved by a performance, it is not because the performer has actually made physical contact with us. Generally separated by the performance space, the contact the performer makes with us is intangible and yet potentially potent. It feels as if energy has poured from the performer’s body into our own, invigorating us as it drains him/her and charging us with the emotional content of the performance.

Barba’s dilated body

This concept has been used in the training and practice of theatrical performers, dancers and martial art exponents. More commonly referred to as

¹²⁷ Yuasa also cites the research done by Takeo Fujiki to measure the EEG readings of two martial arts experts engaged in a kind of psychic battle. Changes in alpha-wave readings were noted when one combatant threw *ki* at another.

“presence” in Western theatre, it is that indefinable something that can make the ordinary extraordinary with the intensity it generates. I am reminded here of what choreographer Hans Van Manen (1999) said of Sabine Kupferberg, describing her as a dancer who could make sitting on a chair look like dance. It is this sort of presence from a performer that makes what they do on stage unique although the action itself may be otherwise quite mundane. Barba (1991) refers to this phenomenon as the “body-in-life” or the “dilated body”¹²⁸, whereby both the performer’s presence and the spectator’s perception is dilated or enlarged. Describing the process in a quasi-scientific manner, Barba writes:

“the particles which make up daily behaviour have been excited and produce more energy, they have undergone an increment of motion, they move further apart, attract and oppose each other with more force, in a restricted or expanded space” (1991:54).

The agitation of these particles produce increased levels of energy which are subsequently dispersed to the spectator, thus effecting a change in their disposition and perception.

As Barba notes, however, it is a relatively easy thing for a performer to mesmerise the novice audience since anything new is in itself “novel” to them. As the audience becomes more experienced, it becomes imperative that the performer’s abilities evolve alongside these expectations in order to maintain the experience of

¹²⁸ It is not entirely clear if by using the term “body” Barba means to describe solely the functions of the corporeal body alone, particularly since the section on the dilated body is followed by one on the dilated mind. In keeping with the concept of self established in the first two chapters however, I find it impossible to draw a clear distinction between the actions of the two and therefore choose to apply a body-mind unity to my interpretation of Barba’s “dilated body”.

“novelty” for their audience. Thus, for the dilated body to maintain its effectiveness, it cannot afford to be a static entity but must change and adapt to different situations.

Moreover, a successful performer does not intuitively generate the appropriate sort of energy all the time. To become a performer who has the capacity to take on a variety of roles successfully requires training. As Zeami pointed out in his treatise on performance, one must distinguish between the ingénue in his/her first flower and the ability of the mature artist. It is like first watching a young dancer with talent and potential. We are always amazed at their youth, ability and abundance of energy and rightly applaud them because of this. As a dancer matures however, this novelty wears thin and without adequate training to develop, sustain and direct their potential, their flower will lose its bloom. For instance, dancers who continue to muscle their way through movements are sometimes referred to (with disdain) as “bashers”, who lack the knowledge and/or ability to make more efficient use of their energies.

The starting point, therefore, for every performer is training. Like the practice of meditation, the process of training is meant to direct our focus onto ourselves, like a kind of practical *epochè*. This facilitates our ability to direct our psychosomatic functions, focussing maybe on one aspect and amplifying it to suit our needs.

“To acquire this power, this life, which is an intangible, indescribable and unmeasurable quality, the various codified theatrical forms use very particular procedures. These procedures are designed to destroy the inert positions of the performer’s body, in order to alter normal balance and to eliminate daily movement dynamics” (Barba, 1991:74).

To acquire and master the skills of performance, that is, to have *kung-fu*, requires daily continuous practice. It is the reason why ballet dancers have to undergo years of

rigorous training, of constantly checking their posture and physical alignment. It is the reason why accomplished, professional dancers still do classes that follow the same format as those for dance students: *barre* then centre work, moving from basic movements to more complex and difficult ones.

It is in this process of training and learning that we develop our own individual body schemes, strengthening the synapses between the various neurones (as Dreyfus suggests). Continuous practice allows for the formation of a smooth and familiar path in the execution of movement, like a reminder to the neural network (and hence the term *habitual* body). To stop practising weakens the bond in the neural pathway and movements therefore cease to be as effortless. I remember my first ballet class after a two-year break from dancing and more recently my first Spanish class after almost two months off due to injury were both disastrous experiences. I felt hopelessly ineffectual and uncoordinated and it took regular practice before everything fell into place once more.

Successful performances are not solely based on the energy created in just the virtuosity of the performer's technique. "For performers, to have *kung-fu* ... also means to possess that special quality which make them vibrate and renders them present" (Barba, 1991:75). Barba records that Balinese theatre defines the performer's skill in three ways: *cesta kara*, the performer's virtuosity or technical skill, *bayu*, the performer's presence or distribution of energy and *taksu* which the Balinese believe to be divine inspiration¹²⁹. Training to attain technical skill is therefore also training to attain and develop our *bayu* or presence.

¹²⁹ From these descriptions it would appear that *cesta kara* and *bayu* are dependent on the self to generate and attain whereas *taksu* seems to stem from an external source.

“By means of techniques passed on to performers by tradition, or through the building of a character, they acquire an extra-daily form of behaviour. They dilate their presence and consequently also dilate the spectator’s perception. They are body-in-life in the fiction of the theatre or dance. Or they aspire to be so” (Barba, 1991:79 & 81).

This is not something that is always understood by students. Theatrical movement is not just moving; it is movement with direction: it is movement that must exude the right energy or tension to have an impact¹³⁰. Moreover, the correct force and direction of energy distinguishes between daily behaviour, a good performance and over-acting. I often tell my students that in order to make their presence felt on stage, they need expand their execution of movement: expand not so much in the quantitative sense, but in the qualitative sense. What is required is that indefinable “thing” which is both tangible and in tangible, the capacity to be not just physically present but emotionally as well, that makes the difference in a performance. I often demonstrate this to students by relaxing my spine and then lengthening it, thus altering my posture and the tension in my torso, changing from an ordinary stance to one that is alert and ready for action.

However, the training of one’s stance and the meaning we may attribute to it is not universal or unambiguous. Barba notes in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* that posture, the way the spine is aligned is often one of the distinguishing features of dances from different cultures. He regards the spine as “energy’s helm” (1991:232), indicating the importance of physical posture in the direction of the energy of our performances¹³¹. What this suggests is that how we generate our energy and what is

¹³⁰ Heidegger gives an account of phenomenal tension in art in *Poetry, Language, Thought* that Horton Fraleigh applies to dance in *Dance and the Lived Body*.

¹³¹ Dōgen and Zeami make similar observations in their treatises on meditation and acting respectively.

deemed acceptable or proper is not purely natural but can be directed by external, socio-historical precedents. As such, while there is a shared, physical basis in the use and generation of energy (e.g. the tensing and relaxing of muscles), there is also a cultural context that can alter the way in which we train for and execute movements and the meanings we apply to them.

Performance training often centres on maintaining different tensions in the body of the performer. In Western theatre, these tensions are sometimes known as *animus* and *anima*¹³². In Balinese theatre, they are called *keras* and *manis*, the strong and vigorous and the soft and delicate, terms I think most suitable to the description of ballet movement. In ballet training, tremendous emphasis is placed on the stance or the posture of the dancer. How to stand is one of the first things every dance student is taught and, all too often, it is one of the last things they perfect.

¹³² Terms used by Carl Jung (1944) to describe the masculine and feminine inner qualities. These ideas were applied to theatre studies by Barba and Savarese (1991) to describe soft energy and vigorous energy in performance.



(Source: personal photograph by author)

As we can see in the above picture, the correct stance requires the ballet dancer to maintain (for the most part) an upright, elongated posture. An image often used in teaching this posture is to lengthen the spine¹³³. The muscles of the legs are always taut while the arms (while firmly held) are gently rounded with soft fingers at the end. The combination of *keras* in the torso and legs and *manis* in the arms¹³⁴ is what gives us that image of the female ballet dancer who performs amazing feats of strength while maintaining an ethereal air about her.

Although these may seem on a superficial level to be physical characteristics, the dancer's ability to convey different moods and meanings to the audience lies

¹³³ I normally tell students to try to make themselves look like the tallest person in the room.

¹³⁴ The same technique would apply to male dancers as well but ideally they are expected display more strength in their arms or, as one ballet organisation describes it, to execute the movement in a masculine manner.

greatly in his/her ability to alter bodily tensions. This indicates that their physicality actually serves a dual, psychosomatic function.



(Source: personal photograph by author)

In the above picture, for example, all four children are holding the same basic pose. Yet a subtle direction in the manner in which the body is held from the two on the left, a change in the everyday flow of their energy, renders their pose more aesthetically pleasing, more present. It is the subtlety in the turn of the head or the curve of an arm, the way in which we channel our energy rather than the amount of physical energy exerted by the performer that creates this qualitative difference that is both seen and felt by audiences.

It can be said, therefore, that the training of a performer functions on two levels that are described by Zeami as the “Function” and the “Substance” of our performances. Thus, when we observe performers at their craft, it may appear “that they are expressing themselves, working on their body and voice. In fact, they are working on something invisible: energy” (Barba, 1991:81). To be a successful performer requires one to develop a sense of how much energy is required for the execution of each movement and where and when to direct it. This serves the dual function of creating the right impact in the delivery of the movement as well as retaining a reserve of energy to complete the performance.

However, the ability to sustain the energy in one’s performance requires more than just physical stamina, or even keeping mental focus on what we are doing. It is also the sustenance of a kind of “extroverted” energy, a physical and mental tension, which is developed and maintained through training. It is the ability to be wholly invested in the moment and to harmonise our energies with those of our surroundings, to be able to open an exchange of energy between performer and audience. The energy of a performance should, therefore, not be understood as stemming solely from the performer-self. Instead, the exchange of energy between performer and audience should, in an ideal situation, be reciprocal in order to complete the circle of communication. Thus, the training of a performer should also teach him/her to be sensitive towards the audience, a kind of stagecraft that is often learnt through the experience of actually being onstage and performing for an audience.

*Taksu*¹³⁵ (the third way in which the Balinese define a performer’s skill) is said to be the divine source of power that comes to a performer during his/her

¹³⁵ It should be noted that *taksu* is defined in Balinese theatre as “a kind of independent divine inspiration which takes possession of the performer and which is not under his [the performer] control” (Barba and Savarese, 1991:77). I have however taken a different spin in my use of this term in this thesis in order to situate the experience of *taksu* in day to day experience.

performance. Giving credit to divine inspiration is not unique to Balinese art alone. Such attribution can be found in many cultures¹³⁶, though perhaps none more developed than that of the ancient Greeks who actually had nine goddesses or muses for nine different kinds of artistic endeavour. What this reinforces, however, is the belief that the power of a performance depends not only on the actions of the performer but is also based on the participation and contribution of the audience; that is, being able to “connect” with them.

There is a mistaken belief that the performer and the audience are isolated from each other in a performance, with one party watching and the other being watched. However, the conventional audience behaviour at a performance disputes this belief. Audiences generally applaud (particularly in dance and musical performances) at various pauses in the performance. In fact, performances are often structured with pauses for just this purpose¹³⁷. For instance, in *flamenco* performances in front of an audience familiar with Spanish dance theatre; it is not unusual for the audience to shout out encouragement during the dancing. Such displays from the audience are like a tangible manifestation of the interchange between audience and performer, with each having the capacity to invigorate the other¹³⁸.

Hence, what the Balinese call *taksu* is perhaps better described as the performer’s ability to “read” his/her audience and alter their performance accordingly to suit their tastes. Zeami recognises this as an important skill of the successful performer (see Chapter 2). This is hardly surprising when one considers that part of the focus of Japanese self-cultivation practices is to harmonise the energies between

¹³⁶Hindu or Thai cultures for instance have dances where the themes are not just related to their religion but dancers are traditionally regarded as being vessels of the gods.

¹³⁷ I was once corrected for rushing through a pause in a dance and told that it detracted from the performance not to allow the audience the opportunity to show their appreciation for the section of the dance already completed.

¹³⁸ Some contemporary performance art is in fact dependent on the active participation of the audience, requiring them to actually become physically involved with the performers, to propel the performance forward.

the self and the external world. This is a skill that can only be attained and mastered through practical experience in front of different audiences and the reason why performance (and more importantly, the transcendent performance) is temporal and historical, specific to its time and place. For instance, a dance performance composed of spectacular, technical steps may be well-received by an uninitiated audience, but a more experienced, theatre-savvy audience may desire something with more artistic depth (e.g. meaning, text, intellectualisation). Since our communication through our performances is based on the premise of an exchange, our capacity to attain *satori*, enlightenment or transcendence is rooted in our ability to negotiate the nuances of our social, physical and historical world with our performances of self through the various means available to us in our chosen medium of communication as well as the main tool that is available for such expression; the embodied self.

The notion of performance that I apply here is one that goes beyond simple theatrical role-playing. It is about the enunciation of meaning and who we are through the various media available to our embodied selves. Whether the actor assumes a role or plays out his/her own life experience on stage, a part of him/her is present in his/her interpretation, expression and performance. My understanding of performance comes predominantly from the experience of the live performer, although it will become necessary to include other types of performance when I discuss the temporal nature of performance. It also incorporates one belief, largely influenced by the work done by anthropologists (Schechner, 1985, Turner, 1992) and also by Zen Buddhists: that we are in constant performance of various roles, even in our daily lives. The broadening of the conventional concept of performance to include the new devices of modern performance art as well as everyday activities therefore requires a re-calibration of how we are to theorise our understanding of performance. To some

extent, modern performance theory has evolved to a point where even the way in which I arrange my furniture can be regarded as a performance of self. It is for this reason that Turner observes that, “man is a self-performing animal – his performances are in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself” (1992:81). But our performances are not only self-revealing to ourselves, they are also self-revealing to others. It is through our actions that we are made significant or known and as such, human behaviour can no longer be simply categorised as behaviour that is or is not significant. Every gesture is an articulation of some aspect of our selves. Even a scratch of the nose can be significant in the sense that it articulates who *I* am because it is the particular way in which *I* scratch my nose.

As with theatrical performances, our success in the life world theatre depends on our ability to connect with our “audience”. As Zeami observed, it is only through practice and experience that the performer learns to “negotiate” with his/her audience to find an appropriate ground for performance, a performer who performs without regard for his/her audience very quickly finds him/herself alienated from them. Likewise, for a speaker to “connect” with the people he/she addresses, he/she must speak of things that concern them or in a manner that will draw their concern and interest. As Roach explains, performance

“entails a compact between actors and audience (even when the roles are rapidly handed back and forth, as in a carnival), a compact that promises the production of certain mutually anticipated effects, but the stipulations of the compact are often subject to negotiation, adjustment, and even transformation” (1996:219).

As such, the compact or connection we make with our audience is by no means binding and must be constantly re-enacted and re-negotiated in every performance.

Thus, as the individual self is not a discrete entity, its performances are affected by presences (and absences) in its external environment. This environment includes the world (social and physical) we live in as well as the other people or selves around us. Thus, the conditions in which we live out our experiences help determine how we develop our performances of self through the multiplicity of restrictions, freedoms, judgements and perceptions that we face as both individuals and groups, which are inherent to our life-world. As such, in examining our performances, it becomes important also to explore this relationship between the self and its environment, and to understand how our perceptions and understandings interact to formulate individual and collective performances of identity.

The formation of self therefore is governed both by physical conditions as well as through socialisation; how we learn to be part of a social community. Whether our presentation of self is deemed acceptable depends on how well we conform to the rules of that community. For the dancer, this may involve our outward appearance (e.g. being sufficiently thin) or the way in which we direct our energy (e.g. being able to making a large leap such as a grand jeté look effortless).

Whether we attain transcendence depends on how well we are able to assimilate what we have learnt into our sense and performance of individual and collective self. The “rituals” of self-cultivation - practices which we explore in the next chapter - are therefore a grooming of our minds and body to connect together to create moments of transcendence as individuals and as a community. The collective self is therefore a socially agreed on entity whose “audience” recognise it as a result of this agreement and whose existence negotiates between ritualised performances of the individual and collective self. This will be explored further in chapter four in the context of a discussion on dance as part of national and individual identity.

Performing Self, Performing Nation

Dance plays many different roles in our social world. It is a forum for communication at cultural, artistic, ideological, emotional and religious levels. The absence or presence of dance in various facets of our social world acts as an indicator of the values and attitudes we apply to that part of our social lives. It also indicates our attitudes towards the body and the place of the body in our various social interactions. Dance, and the practice of dance, is therefore the artistic embodiment of our sense of individual and collective self.

Before I embark upon any further discussion of the concept of embodiment in relation to performance. I would however like to reiterate some points made in previous chapters on the concept of self that will eventually surface and become central to this discussion. First, the self is both corporeal and intellectual but never simply one or the other, with the relationship between the two facets being inherently ambiguous and complex. It is also temporal and therefore always changing although we may cling to the belief that we have a stable inner essence or ego. The self exists in a physical and social environment that is itself also temporal and in constant flux. It shares an exchange in its relationship with this environment, less ambiguous than the distinction between the physical and psychological in the self, but nonetheless ambiguous and capable of altering the nature and significance of the self. We also have a map of the self, developed through experience and practice, which allows us to re-enact ourselves and to engage in a constant daily practice that gives the illusion of constancy and a stable identity.

The self is therefore a doing thing, an entity in action and whose action is its only mode of existence. There is a peculiarity to the experience of self that gives us

the sense that *this* is who I always am even as “who I am” unfolds before me. The notion that the self is *performed* is therefore consistent with our experience of self in the sense that

“performance is always a doing thing and a thing done. On the one hand, performance describes certain embodied acts, in specific sites, witnessed by others (and/or the watching self). On the other hand, it is the thing done, the completed event framed in the time and space and remembered, misremembered, interpreted, and passionately revisited” (Diamond, 1996:1).

Performance of the self, therefore, is both being and becoming occurring at the same moment. We affirm and enunciate our individual and collective identities through the acts we perform and likewise, performance is the enactment and re-enactment of these identities.

This experience is further recognised if not plainly articulated in daily vernacular when we make statements like “it’s not *like her* to do such a thing” or, when someone does something unexpected, “I don’t know *who you are* anymore”. Referring to gender as an example of enacted identity, Butler writes that it

“is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts” (1990:270).

The apparent substance of any identity and its perpetuation over time is therefore dependent on the continued performance of the various actions or behaviours, which are recognised as constituting that particular identity. Our performance

“both affirms and denies this evacuation of substance. In the sense that the ‘I’ has no interior secure ego or core identity, ‘I’ must always enunciate itself: there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth” (Diamond, 1996:5).

For instance, while one still dances one is said to be a dancer, but when one gives up dancing completely, one is said to *have been* a dancer.¹³⁹ Butler (1990)¹⁴⁰ also notes that phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have also used the idea of “acting” to explain the way in which we construct our everyday social reality and encode our assorted symbolic structures. Thus the idea that we act out our identities is really not that new or peculiar.

“Acting” however should not be perceived as merely pretending. An act is “both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed and enacted” (Butler, 1990:272). One element of acting does involve some pretence, particularly when we are in the process of learning specific behaviours and actions through the imitation of a model. However, the ultimate goal of the learning process is to assimilate these behaviours and actions into what we perceive as our respective identities. It is in this way that we are made meaningful (socially) and make meaning through our actions. As Obechain observes,

“in discovering who we are, our first understanding of self comes from the playing out of rituals, roles, behaviour patterns that have been told to us. We

¹³⁹ The dancer Martha Graham once wrote: “I am a dancer. I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practising dancing or learn to live by practising living, the principle is the same.... To practise means to perform” (1998:66).

¹⁴⁰ Goffman is also known to have made a similar point in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

become who we are expected to be by our families, by our social groups, by our culture. We exist in the world in so far as we enact these rituals, roles, behaviours, for when we do so, we are affirmed, ‘stroked’, given being in the world. Who others understand us to be becomes our understanding of self’ (1994:132).

As a dancer learns his/her craft, he/she looks to mentors, be they teachers, older dance students and professional dancers or, for the professional, senior colleagues and artistic directors for guidance and direction. These people influence the way we dance and our understanding and perception of every aspect of being a dancer. I have often noted both in my students and the students of other dance teachers certain things, a style or way of moving that one identifies as a particular mannerism of the teacher. For the dance student, the teacher serves as the first model they follow, the ideal to which they aspire¹⁴¹.

Daily performance is, in this sense, different to theatrical performance, where the performers play an imaginary (for them) character. What is assimilated during training and preparation for the role is the stagecraft involved in playing the character. This is the daily aspect of theatre and it is what we learn in our training as performers. Different performers have different approaches to this process, such as researching the history of the character they are to portray or trying to connect with them on some emotional level. Barbara Newman’s *Striking A Balance: Dancers Talking About Performance* (1998) gives varying accounts from dancers such as Nora Kaye and Alicia Alonso, who adopt an emotional approach to characterisation, and Tanaquil LeClercq and Peter Martins, who have a more technical method in their stagecraft.

¹⁴¹ Of course as their knowledge of dance grow; their ideals and models grow too, although the teacher remains the most immediate of these models. Hence, students serious about a career in dance often move to full-time dance schools where the highest quality of training is available.

Regardless of the method, stage performers do not actually believe that they are the characters they portray; nor, for that matter, do their audience¹⁴². This is a key distinguishing feature between theatre and “real life”. The theatrical conventions (that are part of “real life”) allow us to distinguish between reality and the world of the theatre and to accept the two as co-existing realities.

Butler comments that gender performed on stage “is not contrasted with the real, but constitutes a reality that is in some sense new, a modality of gender that cannot readily be assimilated into the pre-existing categories that regulate reality” (Butler, 1990:278). As such, theatrical identities belong to the reality of the theatre world that may share a relationship with the mundane, everyday world but is still distinguishable from it. For instance in traditional dance theatre, dance movement is the primary mode of communication, unlike daily life where we are more apt to speak and gesture to express ourselves. Although much of the performance art that exists today seeks to break down these conventions, the structural framing or format of theatrical performance¹⁴³ distinguishes it from daily life. Butler refers to this as the phenomenon of theatre that frames both traditional and experimental theatre and sets them apart from the mundane *as* theatre.

Liminality, ritualization and style

There are however, aspects of daily life which do cross over these boundaries between theatre and the everyday and vice versa; aspects such as the daily life world of the performer and the participation of non-professional performers in spectacular social performances. These boundaries are constantly being pushed and explored

¹⁴² The practices of contemporary performance art and reality TV do blur this distinction. Moreover, there are also pockets of audiences (like some fans of soap operas) who like to believe that the actor is just like the character he/she plays.

¹⁴³ The framing of performance may involve such things as setting a definite stage space, advertising that a performance is being staged and accepting money for staging a performance.

whether self-consciously (as in the case of some performance art) or as part of the social process (as is the case for ceremonial or cultural performances). Such performances highlight the liminal state of the act of performance itself. Turner defines the liminal state as “the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions” (1974:237), which I use in this thesis to describe a state of betweenness that exists between two planes of existence or perhaps two planes of being. Hence as a constant process of enactment and becoming, our performances also function as a transition between one social world and another, be it from the “real” or mundane world to the theatre or from childhood to adulthood.

Performances that we recognise as social or cultural patterns of behaviour, imbued with symbolic language and meaning, are called rituals¹⁴⁴. These can be found in all aspects of our lives and range from the private rituals of mundane activities we perform before bedtime to the public, ceremonial rituals of graduation or coming-of-age. Rituals are performances characterised by their continued practice and repetition over time, either by an individual or a social group. Rituals are repeated and repeatable performances of self, fraught with symbolic meaning, and representing our attempt to articulate individual and collective experiences. Rituals help bring order into an otherwise chaotic world, establishing a sense of identity, culture and understanding through repetitive behaviours and routines that achieve a semblance of continuity and predictability in our lives¹⁴⁵. Social rituals are the manner in which the habitual performances of individual selves become socialised performances of community identity.

¹⁴⁴ Although Highwater (1992) makes a distinction between rituals (as a primitive practice) and ceremony (as a civilised and cultured version of a ritual), I will not be drawing such a distinction at this point. Instead I will speak from the understanding that both rituals and ceremonies (as defined by Highwater) are similar processes practiced indifferent spaces and times.

¹⁴⁵ The need for rituals is most evident in people with autism, a group said to have a communication disorder. Their inability to comprehend and communicate often leads them to establish rituals that appear meaningless, even senseless, to us but which the individual who has established them holds very dear to as it creates stability in a bewildering environment.

The behaviour one may see in ritual practices may have no intrinsic significance in itself, but it is the process of ritualization that makes them significant. This faith in rituals appears to stem from an innate belief in causality, that is, the belief that if I perform Ritual X, I will attain Goal Y¹⁴⁶. Thus, Butler writes that not only is such “repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established [or being socially established]; it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation” (1990:277). She goes on to argue that it is such repetition that legitimises experience and meaning, making them social truths. Ritualization therefore becomes one of the processes we engage in to make the performance of a particular set of behaviour part of our collective or individual identity. At a collective level, it is a shared communication between the performer and audience, a staging of an agreed social identity. In speaking of the practices of African-American culture, Highwater notes that the practice of rituals “sustains the life of a people by re-shaping ‘nationalistic’ [or other] experience into a significant form unique to that culture which produces it (1992:14).

However, such “truths” should not be interpreted as possessing a fixed meaning that an individual or even a group adopts by their participation in a particular ritual. Instead, ritual performances and practices are often hijacked, re-interpreted and otherwise transformed as they move from person to person, culture to culture and from one period to another. The temple dances of Indian culture, for instance, were once performed as a religious ritual, an expression of holy ecstasy. As interest in the artistry and theatrical value of dance developed however¹⁴⁷, the temple dances of Indian culture evolved into an art, performed for its aesthetic and entertainment value

¹⁴⁶ Of course there is some basis for this faith in rituals. For instance, if one were to warm up before dancing one is less likely to injure oneself. However, warming up is still no guarantee against injury.

¹⁴⁷ Under the auspices of various Indian rulers, who cultivated these dancers as courtesans and later as artists in their own right.

and as a symbol of Indian culture. Today, the commercial forces of a global village and tourism have further transformed the value of Indian temple dances to suit the contemporary appetites of both the foreign visitor and media savvy native audiences. Bollywood-style productions and the cultural dances performed at tourist spots alter the significance and purpose behind the practice of the dance ritual. As such, re-enactments and re-experiences are never quite the same as the initial enactment or experience, whether it occurred one minute or one hundred years ago. Instead,

“Ritualization as a dynamic process of interpersonal encounter is not passive socialisation but active participation in recognising, experiencing, interpreting, and representing the communicative rationality that defines society as a meaningful community” (Ames, 1994:178).

Thus, the relationship between the performance of rituals and their social and cultural rhetoric is a dynamic interaction. Different players, places and times in history bring different meanings and elements into the performance of rituals and the process of ritualization. Moreover, as time passes we acquire (whether as an individual or as a community) an increasing reflexivity about our actions, which will indubitably alter the way we perceive and conduct these rituals. This aspect of ritualization is one that bears significance in the complexity of the formation of individual and collective identities.

The term ritual is generally used with two applications. The first is to describe the repetition of a specific set of actions or behaviours as part of the performance of our identities. The second denotes those public displays that are both out of the ordinary and at the same time part of the perpetuation of our everyday social identity.

In either usage, rituals are those patterns of behaviour (whether public and spectacular or private and mundane) that form the continuum through which we interact with the life world. We perform rituals as part of our affirmation and enactment of both our collective and individual identities. These rituals identify who we are both to ourselves and to others, making us sensible to the external world. More importantly, our performances form the tangible substance of these identities. As such, a bedtime ritual reaffirms who *I* am because this is the particular way *I* prepare for bed. Similarly, putting my hair in a bun, wearing a leotard and performing my warm up routine reaffirms my status as a dancer because these are things that dancers do.

A common feature in all rituals is that they often mark our passage from one state of being to another. Although we are theoretically in transition in each moment, experientially, we do feel (under the illusion of a stable identity) that we pass from one state to another with some particular actions serving as a transitional device. Hence my ritual activities before bed and dancing also mark my transition from one state of being (i.e. of being awake or not dancing) to another (i.e. of being asleep or dancing). Likewise theatrical performers also follow certain rituals, which help them get “into character”. Activities such as applying makeup and donning a costume functions as a transition process from individual identity to that of stage persona. In effect, these activities “remove” them from the “real” world and place them in the world of the role they are playing. On a larger, social scale, ritual celebrations like weddings, bar mitzvahs and funerals are conducted to mark our transition from one social state or status in our community to another.

But ritual performances are liminal not only because they help us negotiate from one state of being to another in a social, cultural or everyday sense. In his introduction to Turner’s *The Anthropology of Performance*, Richard Schechner writes

that “performance is an art that is open, unfinished, decentred, liminal. Performance is a paradigm of process” (1992:8). Existing as it does in the present, always between the past and the future, the process of performance is itself liminal, always *becoming*, and therefore cannot be collected or retained.

Therefore the true liminality of all performance lies in its capacity to negotiate between corporeal substance and social/cultural function in a specific place and time. Faced with a corporeal and social world that is in constant flux, it is the interplay between the two that forms the continuum of our identities. It is our means of making sense as well as making our selves sensible. But the temporal nature of performance also means that these meanings are constantly being contested and re-negotiated. “Performance is a productive site for the negotiation of issues of location and positionality as a performative space is one of interaction” (Grehan, 1998:25). Dance, for instance, has at different times in history been performed for different reasons, even within the same culture. In Ireland, what we now call Irish dancing was once banned and thus performed not only as part of the Irish culture but as an act of resistance. The various Balinese dances were once religious rituals but are more often performed today for the entertainment of tourists. Hence, that which has one meaning today may still be around tomorrow but be performed in a different context.

Within any ritualistic act, collective and individualistic elements provide the two extremes between which the individual experiences the act. The ritual is performed by the individual but the performance of the ritual grants the individual access to the collective. The art of *flamenco* emerged from a set of circumstances that existed in Spain after its unification, during which the persecution of gypsies required them to perform outwardly functional rituals in order to access and be part of the larger, “Spanish” culture. Aside from the forced assimilation into Spanish culture, the

multicultural mix in the Andalusian community and the widespread poverty among the urban, lower class all contributed (directly or indirectly) toward the formation of *flamenco's* character and identity. But, as with any cultural artefact, the individual can also play a significant role in the formation and development of its character and identity. It is therefore the rituals and manner in which these rituals are performed and continue to be performed - as agreed upon between many individuals within a particular community - that perpetuates the style and structure of *flamenco*.

Identity, our sense of who we are, is therefore more than those external features that we can put a name to. There is something that, as a result of self-cultivation practices, becomes second-nature to us in us such that it will manifest itself regardless of what we may do. I will not adopt Leblon's (1995) terminology and use a phrase like "rooted in the blood", for there is an implication in the phrase that suggests that behaviour is genetically inherited from our parents the way we inherit the colour of our eyes. Instead, I believe that behaviour is learnt; it becomes specific to our corporeal form and subsequently can be moderated such that it seems we were born with the natural ability to perform in a particular manner.

"Movement style¹⁴⁸ is an important mode of distinction between social groups and is usually actively learned or passively absorbed in the home and community. So ubiquitous, so 'naturalised' as to be nearly unnoticed as a symbolic system, movement is a primary, not secondary, social 'text': complex, polysemous, always already meaningful, yet continuously changing" (Delgado & Muñoz, 1997:36).

¹⁴⁸ Movement in this quote refers specifically to dance movement but I feel it can be applied to any act we perform.

Ultimately, it is not so much *what* we do, but *how* we do it that defines us. With this in mind, we return to an earlier quote from Anderson regarding how communities are “distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined” (1991:6). The relevance of this statement can be seen when we look at dance and how it is generally composed of various human physiological movements such as jumping and turning. For instance, what distinguishes ballet from Irish dance is the way movements are performed with legs turned out in ballet. What distinguishes *baile flamenco* from tap dance is the manner in which the body is held or moved, the essence which is *style*. Likewise, when we speak of identity and the articulation of self, the genuineness or falsity may be relevant in the socio-historical context of collective identities, but this should not be said to extend to one’s personal sense of self. However, because we do not have a discrete existence from our external environment, our experience of the falsity or genuineness of our self can be affected by external perceptions of who we are.

Embodiment in the performance of individual and collective identities

We have seen so far that shared identities tend to be the mythic construct of a community that articulates and helps to maintain their unity as a social group. Like clothing trends, shared identities are a collection of what is “in” and what is “out”, acceptable or unacceptable. And just like fashion, some identities endure over time while others fade away or just never “take”. What this tells us is that for identities to become lived realities, there has to be some complicity between the construct and its targeted “audience”. Identities are therefore empty in the sense that they are tenuous agreements and must be continually enacted and re-enacted and have no concrete existence beyond the moment of performance. Thus, identities exist only in the

present, and are not something we arrive at in some distant future through the acts we perform but are manifested in these everyday performances themselves. However, what appeals to one party of people may not always appeal to another. In reviewing the history of *baile flamenco*, we can see it as an example of how such cultural identities are negotiated with different audiences.

In the preceding section we examined how a community shapes and articulates its identity through its culture. However, as Bourdieu writes,

“all knowledge... is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression, and that between conditions of existence and practices or representations there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who, far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to the invitations or threats of a world whose meanings they have helped produced” (1984:467).

Certainly, the culture of *baile flamenco* recognises the role of the individual in both the structure of the dance form and its expectations of individual participants. Like many social or communal forms of dancing, *baile flamenco* (in its original context) is not performed in the theatrical sense of the word. Instead, it is very much a collaborative affair, like a family gathering where everyone gets to participate as performers (i.e. without a distinct audience-spectator divide) in its discourse. However, *baile flamenco*, in its fullest bloom, is also traditionally a solo dance form, a personal and intimate means of self-expression. In this section, I want to look at the role the individual plays in helping to determine and sustain this identity through his/her performances of self.

Grau writes that “every dance says something about the history of the people who created it, but every dance is also a re-invention” (1998:200). This re-invention of dance is the role the individual plays when he/she participates in its discourse. There is a set of rules (mostly pertaining to the structure of *flamenco* music and in particular, the *cante flamenco*) that apply to the choreographic content of most *flamenco* dances. Within these limits, the dancer him/herself is given free rein over what he/she does; particularly since there is generally no other dancers with whom he/she must move in complement with. Instead there is an arrangement that exists between the individual dancer, singer, guitarist and the traditional conventions of the music that has allowed both the community and individual to work in tandem as a driving force in the development of the art.

The influence of individual performers in the evolution of the dance has always existed in *baile flamenco* and other forms of dance. This is evident in the interpretative contributions individual performers make to their art. Moreover, this is something all performers do since each performance is unique and personal to the performer in that they are unrepeatable selves acting within specific historical contexts. As each person’s lived experiences are unique their performances are already personalised acts without necessarily meaning them to be. For instance, in my role as a dance student I am always watching others, learning their style of movement and trying to incorporate this into my own actions. At the same time, I am aware of and reminded when I hold myself up for comparison, that there differences in my interpretation and execution of another’s style.

Beyond the symbolic interests of artistic interpretation, there is also a material interest (Bourdieu, 1977) in the individual’s performance of culture. Being diverse entities, our corporeal forms are diversely inclined to do certain things better or more

easily than others¹⁴⁹. As individuals, dancers are likely to place certain emphasis on the things they do best in the dances they perform. Choreographers also tend to take the dancer's particular style and ability into consideration when choreographing dances specifically for them. Teachers too are apt to place emphasis on aspects of the dance in which they (as dancers) are particularly skilled¹⁵⁰ or believe are particularly important to the development of a dancer. Such actions of individual dancers, choreographers and teachers set standards for subsequent public understandings, perceptions and the performance of the dance.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that artistic creation and interpretation is a path that negotiates between individual and collective identities. While it may be our intent to accurately reproduce the substance or style of a dance from the past, it is essentially a reproduction that is removed from its original context. When performed in a different environment and/or embodied by different individuals, the dance takes on new significance. Thus, as *baile flamenco* has moved from being a dance belonging to the Andalusian gypsy culture to being a dance performed by non-gypsies (and even in the context of the present-day gypsy community), it has been re-codified many times over by a myriad of individuals removed in time, place and social situation from its origins.

Although *baile flamenco* may still serve as a signifier of Spanish, Andalusian and gypsy identity, its value and function in society is both tinged (consciously and unconsciously) with a nostalgia for the past as well as the desire to progress into the future. To this end, "dance promises the potential re-inscription of those bodies with alternate interpretations of that history" (Delgado & Muñoz, 1997:9) for people who participate in its discourse. What we perceive and the ideals and desires we may

¹⁴⁹ This is where concepts like having an ideal body for certain physical tasks come into play.

¹⁵⁰ At two flamenco workshops I attended recently, one teacher gave considerable attention in her classes to the use and shape of our arms while the other (who later demonstrated her brilliant footwork at a performance) placed more emphasis on developing strong and crisp footwork.

project onto cultural artefacts as individuals vary accordingly. Moreover, as the understanding and perception of *baile flamenco* is not universal, we can hardly expect its performance to be so. Although we may re-create a part of history through the performance of dance, dance is at the same time “the symbol of the performance of living” (Graham, 1998:66) and being such, must evolve with the life of the community and the individual performer.

At an obvious level, the individual dancer contributes to the evolution of their art by doing something never tried before. In the transition of *baile flamenco* from the gypsy community to a national and international stage, an assortment of innovations were attempted to create suitable spectacles to draw crowds in. As mentioned previously, the increasing popularity of *baile flamenco* abroad created the need for dances that could fill the proscenium style stage (which was the complete antithesis to the way traditional *baile flamenco* was staged). The evolving audience appetite also demanded more variety from the repertoire of *baile flamenco*, and Andalusian folk dances such as the *fandango* and the *sevillanas*¹⁵¹ were added. As these dances are performed with castanets, it was not long before the use of castanets became an expected part of what was popularly recognised as part of *flamenco* dance and the use of castanets became synonymous with the Spanish and gypsy identity.

To capitalise on the specific characteristics (the playing of castanets, the rapid footwork and the sensuality of the dance) which seemed to most attract their new-found audiences, *flamenco* dancers began to adapt the style and content of their repertoire. Individual dancers experimented with different innovations but, needless to say, not all were met with enthusiasm. For instance, while Carmen Amaya is remembered for her performance of the *zapateado* (traditionally a man’s dance) in

¹⁵¹South American style dances were also later introduced into the standard repertoire of the flamenco dancer.

men's attire, it was reportedly La Cuenca who was the first to do so. What was the difference in these two performances that cause people to remember one better than the other?

When we speak of dance and dancers we often recall their "signature" pieces. In *baile flamenco*, Carmen Amaya is known for her *zapateado* and La Macarrona for her *alegrias*. While they may not have been the first or only ones to perform these dances, they are remembered in dance history because of their unique virtuosity and interpretation of the dance. The novelty¹⁵² of their work lies in their delivery or performance of the dance rather than actual innovation. But how do we recognise this novelty, the uniqueness of a great performance, from the everyday transcendent quality anyone who dances may attain? We return again to the issue of the audience-performer relationship and the exchange of energy that must occur between them.

While I may attain a level of transcendence (a sense of satisfaction and oneness with my performance) it is a transcendence that remains contained within myself. In comparison, great performers have the ability to generate a greater intensity, to project this out to their audience and, more importantly, to solicit a response from them. The skill of a great performer, therefore, lies not so much in the technical virtuosity of their dance (although this helps) but in their capacity to reach out to their audience. The gypsies call this passion or energy "*duende*" and regard its manifestation to be more important than technical virtuosity.

These great performers set the standard to which performers that follow try to live up to. They create images and standards that, at first personal to them, are eventually absorbed into collective memory as the image, standard and practice of the dance. Certainly, in the popularity of *baile flamenco* both in and out of Spain, one can

¹⁵² See discussion on "Novelty" in Chapter Two.

say that the cult of the individual must have had a significant impact. After all the art of *baile flamenco* does stem from a culture and people so long despised and repressed throughout Europe as a collective. It would appear then that by seizing upon specific characteristics displayed by specific individuals and subsequently using these to typify the community, the gypsy culture became a tolerable, exotic and desirable commodity.

Although its popularity (both at home and abroad) has waxed and waned with changing fashions, its endurance over time has much to do with the individuals who have emerged as “stars” of their art. During the so called “golden age” of *baile flamenco* (from early in the twentieth century), the brilliance of such individuals as La Macarrona (Juana Vargas), Estampio (Juan Sanchez), La Argentina (Antonia Mercé) and Vicente Escudero¹⁵³ revived and later rejuvenated the art of *baile flamenco* which had begun to suffer from the effects of commercialisation. It was also during this period that the dancers, together with modern Spanish composers, re-invented *baileflamenco*, bringing it into the modern world of theatrical dancing. Their work saw the development of a new stream of Spanish dance (the neo-classical) which combines elements of *baile flamenco*, classical Spanish dance and modern theatrical dance set to music influenced by traditional *flamenco* rhythms and classical and modern orchestral music (among others). During the 1920s and 30s, productions by La Argentina and Escudero became, for much of Europe and America, the embodiment of *flamenco* dance.

¹⁵³ It should be noted that La Argentina and Vicente Escudero are both regarded by *flamenco* purists to be classical Spanish dancers which is quite different to *baileflamenco*.

***Baile flamenco* and the evolution of Spanish identity**

This is an image of embodiment that persists till today, particularly since the inception of the Spanish National Ballet. It has resulted in more people training in this new tradition of dance and more productions in a similar vein, thus altering public perceptions of what *baile flamenco* is (or should be). Such images have been further reinforced in recent times by the films of Carlos Saura who featured the work of avant-garde *flamenco* dancer Antonio Gades in *Blood Wedding* and *Carmen*. One can say therefore (to paraphrase my earlier quote from Bourdieu) that a dance is as much defined by its being perceived as by its being. When a demand for something arises, a supply line tends to develop to fill this need. As such, it is not only the performer who propositions the spectator, but the roles can be reversed with the spectator initiating communication (in the form of applause or criticism) with the performer.

Moreover, the specifics of this demand can evolve into a “normal” practice of that society. In this way, spectators as individuals can affect the development of culture and consequently the articulation of identity in their society. Thus,

“strategies aimed at producing ‘regular’ practices are one category, among others, of officialising strategies, the object of which is to transmute ‘egoistic’, private, particular interests... into disinterested, collectively, publicly avowable, legitimate interests” (Bourdieu, 1977:40).

The veracity of this statement lies in the lamentations of *flamenco* purists who, while admiring the work of the Spanish National Ballet, believe that their success has come at a cost to pure (or real) *baile flamenco*. Certainly, unless one has been initiated into the culture of Spanish dancing, the fundamental differences between performances from the Spanish National Ballet and traditional *baile flamenco* may not be

immediately apparent. As the theatrical art of *flamenco* dancing moves further beyond the gypsy community into a global one, both the nature of the dance and the perception and performance of it are changing.

Thus, there is in performance a tradition - historical context - within which each new performer must negotiate a locus for him/herself. Butler writes that

“the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene... [and our sense of identity is]... an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again” (1990:277).

As performers we are aware or are made aware of these historical meanings and must then choose to either try to re-create the performance in the spirit of its original production or to deviate from them through the re-negotiation of meaning or disposal of the performance completely. As Graham puts it, “there are always ancestral footsteps behind me, pushing me, when I am creating a new dance, and gestures are flowing through me. Whether good or bad, they are ancestral” (1998:70). Such is the case in the history of the development of modern dance.

Modern dance first came to the fore at a time when classical ballet still dominated Western theatrical dance art. Tired of trying to fit into the stereotypes that surrounded the balletic tradition, women like Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman and Martha Graham developed new styles and ways of dancing that were intended to be truer to the “natural” form of the body. What we perceive to be natural, however, is highly subjective. While perhaps their contribution to the “script” of Western theatrical dance was not consciously intended as the antithesis of the existing

canon, the resultant product was, in general, earthy, grounded and conspicuously absent of anything remotely resembling classical ballet¹⁵⁴.

Even within the one tradition, such as ballet, new performers often bring new meaning to existing works. The dancer Nora Kaye says of her own experience of dance, that

“it’s very difficult to say where the creator and the interpreter take on and leave off. The dancer becomes an instrument, and also it’s a physical thing, that you move in a particular way. Let’s say he was the author and the director and I was just the instrument, the actor. You’re not an automaton; you automatically personalise things that you’re told to do.... There’s always the play, but there’s always what the actor brings to the lines” (as cited in Newman, 1998:57).

It is like a tune composed by one person and played by another. While the composer may determine the notes that make up the tune, the musician can choose his/her instrument to play the tune and in addition, may vary the rhythm and tempo to suit different audiences, moods and occasions. Each participating factor and/or individual is an active agent in the construction of a performance. Thus performances are, in this sense, unique experiences and create a history and process in the development of both the individual and collective self.

Despite a tune being composed by one person and played by another, both the composer and the musician have a mutual understanding of the forms and notation of as well as the “rituals” within that particular musical style. As previously suggested, rituals also serve as collectively agreed upon signifiers of what is considered to be a particular social state or community. Desired traits and cultural practices are often

¹⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that in one of her later works, Graham does adopt some balletic movements.

promoted by the state and other dominant groups within a society as belonging to and defining the people of that nation in order to create a sense of commonality. In the past, folk dances were also a source of regional and ethnic identification and pride. In today's modern societies, such dances (and other cultural activities) are often re-invoked as a means of remembering and re-creating the past. "The diasporic dancing body becomes the vehicle for the articulation of culture under siege. It literally remembers cultural practices" (Delgado & Muñoz, 1997:17). Migrants often maintain noteworthy aspects of their traditional culture in an effort to stay "in touch" with their ethnic identity and heritage. It is for this reason that Irish, Highland, Indian and Croatian dance (for example) has survived in Australia and continues to be practised by individuals of those ethnic origins¹⁵⁵.

In the modern nation state, folk dances can also be used to create and establish a sense of national unity. Post-colonial countries, newly created countries, countries that have experienced radical social and political upheaval and countries primarily made up of a diverse migrant population all find a need for a common identity to unify their people. In such instances, "dance sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity where identification takes the form of histories written on the body through gesture" (Delgado & Muñoz, 1997:9). Desired traits and cultural practices are often promoted by the state and other dominant groups within a society as belonging to and defining the people of that nation in order to create a sense of commonality. The ancient dances of Cambodia were once banned under the Khmer Rouge because of its association with the deposed monarchy. However, with the end of the Khmer Rouge's tyrannical rule, Cambodian dance enjoyed a resurgence in

¹⁵⁵Of course these dances are also practised by individuals, whether or not they are part of their ethnic culture, for other reasons such as artistic value, personal enjoyment and socialisation.

popularity. In place of its past associations Cambodian dance now symbolises the birth of a new, democratic Cambodian identity.

Dance is also a particularly popular and potent practice as it transcends the barrier of language and intimately involves our physical (and mental) sense of self. It is also often presented as a form of entertainment and/or social activity rather than political action, and this furthers its appeal with the masses. Because it is learned behaviour, dance is also a physical form of self-identification that does not rely on those passive aspects of physical being (e.g. the colour of one's skin) that has been used to segregate rather than integrate. Anyone can dance if they are willing to learn (although degree of proficiency will vary) and through integration into our physical sense of being, dance penetrates our sense of self. This aspect of self-cultivation techniques contrasts with most other physical means of identification that tend to be alienating as they depend on passive physical features that we cannot always easily alter.

The task before us is to understand how the performance of any one identity emerges from a collection of individuals to become (at some "official" level) the universal representation of the community at large. Benedict Anderson (1991) refers to the social phenomenon of nations as "imagined communities" in his similarly titled book. In reasoning the appropriateness of the phrase, he makes a statement that is significant to the enquiry we undertake: that "*in the mind* of each individual [member] lives the *image* of their communion" (1991:6). What this alludes to is the constructedness of identities; particularly those which seek to encompass a large community. It brings into question the process of this construction, the evolution that arrives, at specific points in time, at a collective representation of a particular group of individuals.

Collective identities are rarely universal to every member of the community they are said to represent. Individuals or groups may hold on to some characteristic that separates them from the dominant community or vice versa. Despite the importance that is sometimes placed on the “originality” of cultural identities in many communities, Anderson believes that “communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined” (1991:6). This points to us a fundamental issue in the work of historians, social anthropologists and cultural analysts. In studying any ancient culture, it would be difficult and often impossible to obtain authentic records of the “origins” of culture (if indeed such a thing exists). What we work from is what we know today and the significance that is attached to these cultures in the contemporary world. A search for an “ultimate truth” should therefore be set aside in order to study how people perceive who they, their communities and their heritage are, and what it means to them. Desmond (1997) believes that not only must the path through which the transmission of a form be studied, but the nature of its re-inscription requires similar attention as well. To this end, we shall discuss the past and current status of some of Spain’s regional dances (particularly those of the contested Basque region) and the emergence of *flamenco* as an icon of Spanish culture and identity. Thus we see here two characteristics in the transmission of culture: preservation and integration. It is important to note that, in either case, what occurs is the re-inscription of cultural artefacts and their social significance.

The cultural identity of the modern nation of Spain is often represented by the art of *flamenco*, historically associated with the itinerant gypsies who are regarded as foreigners in any land. There has always been a distinction between the court dances of the nobility and the popular or folk dances of the people. In the sixteenth century

however, as part of the post-unification wave, there was a resurgence of political interest in folk dancing. These dances were given new meaning in the culture of the new nation and were often constructed to promote national unity and identity. Ivanova (1970) cites the example of a Catalanian dance in which two groups of dancers representing the rich and the poor switch places thus signifying the unity of the Spanish people. This is what Ramsey refers to as the “folklorization of national identity through performance” (1997:346). An ideal is linked with a long, meaningful past that is presented as important to contemporary heirs of this heritage. This is a process that is not without ambiguity, particularly in the nature of the construction and manipulation of the historical significance and origins of style. What is excluded is as socially and politically symbolic as what is included. Ultimately, it was in this period that the elements that characterise Spanish dance were officially recognised. These elements were the following: Spanish musical rhythms, native steps (from regional dances) and a distinct manner of execution (Ivanova, 1970).

It would be foolish to assume, however, that such official statements are always all encompassing descriptions of actual, lived situations. As the following discussion on the Basque region will show, national identities are often representations of the majority of the population or ideals perpetuated by the governing body. Although national identities are meant to facilitate the assimilation of all members of that nation, the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the discourse of its formation tends, instead, to reinforce the schism or alienation within. As an idealised model, national identities tend not to reflect lived experiences and realities: sometimes even of the majority. In this sense, the transcendent performance of “Spanish” identity equates a threat to the perpetuation of their own indigenous culture¹⁵⁶. Therefore, the

¹⁵⁶ This is not to say that the Basque people do not perceive such performances to be transcendent. While still evoking a response, the transcendent performance, in this case, brings about a negative

contemporary exercise of Basque cultural practices, such as dance, is no longer perceived simply as a social activity¹⁵⁷, but has taken on a new, politicised meaning since the inception of the Basque nationalist movement.

“A culture [therefore] is not a static entity but continuing construction of its members. Even the marked sense of culture upheld by politicised ethnonationalists is not a rigid selection of past and present ways but an everchanging collection of beliefs and practices which evolve, according to contemporary circumstances, their upholders’ conception of those circumstances and their aims for the future” (MacClancy, 1996:181).

Consequently, our approach to and understanding of social (and, in particular, socio-historical identities that are being invoked to create a contemporary sense of national identity), must be viewed within the context of these circumstances, conceptions and aims for the future.

The nationalist movement also saw a resurgence of interest in traditional Basque dances; many of which were previously no longer performed due to the social changes brought about by the rapid industrialisation in the late nineteenth century¹⁵⁸. Despite the decline of these artefacts of Basque culture, it is clear from their pride in their regional identity that the Basques retained a sense of being Basque. As such, the performances of identity through the practice of distinct cultural artefacts should be

reaction instead of the positive reaction we would normally associate with the concept of transcendence.

¹⁵⁷ Although they still serve this function.

¹⁵⁸ As with most societies in that period, the change from a culture largely centred on the pastoral life of small village communities to the bustle of the urban, industrial cities saw certain social practices fall into disuse. Harvest festivals, for instance, become less important to people who work in factories and consequently, harvest dances may no longer be performed.

understood not only as the practice of self, but also as overt, collective and particular¹⁵⁹ displays of the *affirmation* and *sharing* of identity.

These public performances of cultural affirmation are important in sustaining the illusion of cultural continuity because of the shifting nature of cultural identity. As with the identity of the individual self we discussed in Chapter One, collective identities, collective perceptions of self must grow and change to accommodate growth and change in its external and internal environment. To adhere too stringently to the past may result in the extinction of that culture. This is something that Basque nationalists recognise and so they strive to construct themselves both as “heirs to a laudable history and also as ‘up-to-date’” (MacClancy, 1996:182). Contemporary cultures (such as the Basque) that are based on identification with the past are faced with two challenges in their performance of their heritage: restoration and renovation (MacClancy, 1996). While the aim of restoration is to retain or regain authenticity, this must co-exist with the modern demands of society¹⁶⁰. Two demands I wish to discuss now are the contextual practicality and relevance of the act, and the implications of nostalgia.

In this desire for the past, Basque history becomes mythologised as something better than the present (whether or not it is). In speaking of nostalgia, Bennett refers to it as a desire for an “imagined and mythic” (1996) past. It is

“a longing for certain qualities and attributes in lived experience that we have apparently lost, at the same time as it indicates our inability to produce parallel qualities and attributes which would satisfy the particularities of lived experience in the present” (Bennett, 1996:5).

¹⁵⁹ Particular in the sense that this is what we choose to showcase as an aspect of who we are.

¹⁶⁰ Much like when an old building is restored but modern plumbing and electrical fittings are included. The building may also be used for a purpose other than that for which it was originally designed.

Thus, by putting elements of our past into practice, our intent is to, effectively, re-live or re-create historical, social and cultural identities; to once again assimilate such qualities into our individual and collective sense of self. However, the act of re-creation puts into question the “authenticity” of folk dances and how true to the past the contemporary practice of history in dance can remain in the face of the evolving role of dance in society.

While the actual content of the dance may not have changed significantly, the structure and context in which it is performed has shifted considerably. This creates different demands on the performer and new significance for the act itself. As Zeami wrote in his treatises on acting, it is the role of the performer to respond to changes of expectation from the audience (and community). It stands to reason too that since dance, like all cultural practices, is a lived and living act, a change in one facet in its performance must have repercussions on the nature of the dance itself. This is particularly evident in dance (and other performance arts) which comes into and out of existence in the moment of performance. As such, we can never really retrieve the past in its entirety, nor would we really want to (whether we realise it or not). Instead, what is articulated through our performance of the past is our *perception* of what was, who we are and what our current desires are.

However, attempts at restoration and renovation often meet with both success and failure with their audiences. To understand how success and failure is determined, we must refer back to Zeami’s observation of the importance of responding to one’s audience. Instead of deconstructing the structural elements of a performance, however, I would like to take a slightly alternative view of the issue that is based on the experience manifested in performance. It is my belief that the success of the restoration and renovation of a dance lies first in how well integrated the dance is into

the dancer's sense of being (which we have discussed already in previous chapters); and, secondly, in how well integrated the dance is into the audience expectation and perception of that dance in their community. To further explore this issue, I will now discuss the art of *flamenco*, its rise in popularity both within and outside Spain and how this has created a distinction between *baile flamenco*, the Spanish theatrical dance art performed by trained professionals, and *baile flamenco*, the local folk art dance performed by the general public.

Since 1830, when the Conservatoire de Maria Christina (Madrid Conservatorium) was established, there has been an officially sanctioned dance art form in Spain. While such dances were hugely popular among the elite of society and aspects of these dances adopted by the common people in their own dances, the regional folk dances remained the favoured dance of the people¹⁶¹. In Andalusia, a region that had to negotiate a new identity in the unified Spanish empire, *baile flamenco* soon emerged as the dance of the common people, in particular, the gypsies and the poor. While the Castillian monarchy was successful in eradicating the “Functional” aspect of being a gypsy, the “Substance” of the gypsy identity not only eluded their efforts, but emerged in new practices of self. In the poverty stricken decades that followed the unification, the *baile jondo* (dance based on the *cante jondo* or deep song) became a vehicle for the expression of the anguish of the people¹⁶². We may infer from this that assimilation is a two-way exchange. While one can suppress the external manifestations of a cultural (or even individual) identity, it is more difficult to do the same to those intangible qualities that, once assimilated into our sense of being, becomes innate to us.

¹⁶¹ This is due in some part to the strong sense of regional identity in Spain and not just an illustration of the divide that existed between the nobility and the commoners. Moreover, folk dancing is still a vital part of the many festivals held throughout Spain.

¹⁶² Pure *flamenco* dance is non-narrative and can be described as an outburst of emotion in dance form.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a growing awareness of the nation state and the need to articulate its identity in the modern world was sweeping throughout Europe. The wealthy *payo* of Andalusia began to take interest in *baile flamenco*. What appealed to the *payo* in the dance and music of the gypsies were their romanticised notions of a bohemian gypsy lifestyle and the spirituality of their culture. Gypsy dancers were first invited for private performances and, eventually, their popularity saw the establishment of the *café cantantes*. This interest from *payo* Andalusians marked the first time *baile flamenco* was performed, in the theatrical sense, without the participation of a traditional audience who would join in by clapping, shouting (*jaleo*) and dancing. By drawing a clear distinction between the performer and the audience, this also created a new forum for the performance of *baile flamenco*.

Curiously, the art of flamenco seemed to fill the void of a national identity in Spain, a result of both the demise of the high culture of the *ancien regime* and the strong sense of regional identity that had still not dissipated throughout Spain. As a relatively new culture created as a result of specific conditions in urban Spain, it appealed to the newly emerging middle-class whose participation in the discourse of *baile flamenco* resulted in the “artificial construction of popular culture as a functional folkloristic *pot-pourri*” (Steingress, 1998:152). Through the eradication of the previous cultural significances and the inclusion of the projected desires of the Spanish middle-class, the nature, structure and myth of *baile flamenco* began to evolve in a new direction.

In the late nineteenth century *baile flamenco* took on a new popularity, with the bohemian set of Western Europe also taking interest in the “exotic” dance form. The introduction of a passive audience, unfamiliar with the lived experiences of the

gypsy, inevitably altered how (and why) *baile flamenco* was performed. The *flamenco* dancer had to develop awareness for the tastes of their newly-found audience in order to secure their interest. Bourdieu writes that “a class is defined as much by its being perceived [whether by themselves or by external parties] as by its being, by its consumption” (1977:483). Thus, although based on the lived culture of the gypsy community in Spain, these qualities were “accentuated, transformed and accommodated at the same moment to common stereotypes” (Washabaugh, 1998:169). So it was that particular emphasis fell on the spectacular *zapateado* (footwork) traditionally performed by men to the point that, now, women too (since Carmen Amaya) perform *zapateado* dances. The growing involvement of *payo* Andalusians in the dance had also introduced traditional Andalusian folk dances such as the *sevillanas* into the “standard” repertoire of the *flamenco* dancer.

At this point in the evolution of *baile flamenco*, we see how the interaction between two cultures can bring about the formation of a new, distinct style of dance and cultural identity. As individuals or a collective, we are often exposed to ways of being (whether through dance or some other cultural artefact) that can influence our subsequent actions. While some (like the Basque people and the *flamenco* purists) act vigorously to prevent the integration of these “foreign” practices into their own native culture, other people use this intercultural exchange as an opportunity to expand their perception and practice of self.

The growing involvement of non-gypsies in the practice of *baile flamenco* saw an intellectual and cultural backlash begin to develop among those who would call themselves aficionados of the “real” or traditional *baile flamenco*. Repulsed by what they saw as the increasingly kitsch qualities due to the bastardisation and commercialisation of a noble art form, they began to draw away from the popular

images of *baile flamenco* enjoyed by bourgeois society. As a response to this backlash toward theatrical *baile flamenco*, artists such as Gabriel Lorca began to revive an interest in *cante jondo* of *flamenco* and its associated dances. This resulted in the development of two *flamenco* cultures that have, at times, crossed those ideologies that divided them, and then diverged again.

During the twentieth century, *baile flamenco* fell into further disrepute within the Spanish community when its popular images were mobilised by Franco's regime to rally the support of the masses and promote the image of a happy Spanish citizenry abroad. One of the problems official bodies face in "the reclamation of the 'popular' as grounds for nationalist identity is [that it is] to some degree, a sanitising, normalising project" (Ramsey, 1997:371). To bypass the more intense, potentially volatile and socially critical aspects of the *baile*, the regime had disregarded the *jondo* variant that was the embodiment of social anguish and repression in favour of the commercially bastardised *chico* (light) and sanitised variety that had become popular of late in Western Europe. Consequently, in attempting to fix the identity of a culture, there is a tendency to ignore and remove those elements we dislike and highlight or even add qualities we prefer to be associated with. This, however, tends also to create an idealised model of identity¹⁶³ that is removed from lived realities.

In 1978, the Spanish Ministry of Culture¹⁶⁴ formed the Spanish National Ballet (Ballet Nacional de España) to capitalise on the international interest in *baile flamenco*. The company was founded with the twofold purpose of reviving and generating new work from Spanish choreographers. Having a national dance company not only ensures the survival of such work; it also presents a forum for the

¹⁶³ Idealised models of reality are, like a character one may play on stage, an alternate reality set in a different context. And, like an audience watching a theatrical performance, we can choose whether or not to accept this model of who we are.

¹⁶⁴Under the democratic government established by King Juan Carlos.

international performance of Spanish national dance art. However, as one purist has observed, “performances by the Spanish National Ballet are far removed from any authentic *flamenco* tradition” (Schreiner, 1990:22). In order not to appear artistically backward to an international audience, the repertoire and style of companies like the Spanish National Ballet have had to evolve with the rest of the Western dance world.

The new *baile* has developed consciously avoiding those kitsch qualities that had previously plagued innovation in *baile flamenco*. While it is now accorded its due artistic respect, there is still a distinction between the theatrical form that belongs to the official and high cultural identity of Spain and the original, *gitano* form of *baile flamenco* that is championed by *flamenco* aficionados. Throughout Andalusia traditional *flamenco* is still exists in the performances at *café cantantes*. What you see during such occasions is very different to the performances of the Spanish National Ballet which generally place more emphasis on the overall staging (much like classical ballet) of the dance.

What some perceive as the loss of *duende* in the performances of the Spanish National Ballet and other modern day companies is due in some part to the way they are staged (or need to be staged for commercial purposes). *Baile flamenco* was traditionally performed in small, intimate spaces, in a non-narrative form and by a soloist¹⁶⁵. However, as Ramsey observed on the staging of voodoo folklore in Haiti during the mid-twentieth century,

“Western theatrical constraints of time, space and spectacle necessitated considerable adjustment in translating these indigenous performance traditions to the national stage” (1997:363).

¹⁶⁵ There are a few dances, like the *sevillanas*, that are performed in a group but these are generally Andalusian folk dances that have been introduced into the repertoire of the *baile*.

Likewise, the traditional staging of *baile flamenco* has been considerably altered to suit the standard proscenium arch stage of Western theatre¹⁶⁶. Experimentation has ranged from adopting a narrative structure, the stylistic effects practised in modern dance and the symmetrical staging of classical ballet.

Such changes necessarily alter the energy an audience may expect to be generated in a traditional performance. Unlike ballet, the energy of the traditional *flamenco* dancer is very much contained, turned inward and is consequently not immediately suited to the openness of the proscenium arch stage which seems to call for expansiveness and extroversion. The structure of the dance was therefore altered to create a spectacle suitable for the conventional stage of Western theatre. This also involved the inclusion of folk dances such as the *fandango* and the *sevillanas* (which could be performed with large numbers of people) and the introduction of set choreography into *baile flamenco*. The focus of the dance also shifted to technique and the attainment of transcendence through technical merit (much like ballet) as well as the choreography of the dance (as opposed to the previously spontaneous improvisations¹⁶⁷).

However, there are those who believe that to adhere strictly to a choreographed routine is to remove the *duende* of the *baile*. Schreiner writes that

“only a soloist working within a defined format¹⁶⁸ can give full range to his own improvisation, his own creation; only in this way can the ‘*duende*’, that

¹⁶⁶ Keeping in mind that this is a dance form with strong Eastern influence.

¹⁶⁷ Until the development of its theatrical form, *baile flamenco* was very much a solo dance form open to the choreographic interpretations of individual dancers and, indeed, particular moments in a performance.

¹⁶⁸ The various dances have their own set *compás* (rhythm) and style. The dancer is pretty much free to do what he/she wants within these and the confines of working with a guitarist and singer.

mysterious genius which sparks spontaneous inspiration in the world of flamenco, really take hold of the artist” (1990:94).

For the traditional *flamenco* artist, it is not so much one’s technique as it is one’s presence or energy that determines one’s skill. Unlike ballet where technique takes primary position and the average dancer finishes their career in their thirties, it is more probable for the traditional *flamenco* artist to reach his/her peak much later in life. Schreiner recounts how “Juana Vargas La Macarrona, queen of the *bailaoras*, was sixty years old and overweight when she reached her peak as a dancer” (1990:95). Moreover, she remained the “undisputed star” (1990:95) of the *tablaó* where she performed at until her death at ninety.

I believe that the *duende* of the new *baile* is not so much dissipated, as altered, in order to function successfully in its new environment. The larger stages and increased audience numbers necessitated a new mode of channelling the energy of the performance in order to sustain a connection with the audience. The success and effectiveness of this new development in *baile flamenco* can be judged by the popularity and spread of the dance form among culturally diverse and savvy audience. Today this commercial success has ensured its continued survival not only in Spain but in many other parts of the world from Europe to America and Asia. While the demands of commercialisation may have forced the evolution of *baile flamenco*, it also (for better or for worse) maintains its status as a living art. This is particularly important in a time when it could easily fade into memory as a result of the loss of that original environment which first saw the birth of *flamenco*.

Baile flamenco is no longer just an aspect of the community life of the gypsies. It has also become an internationally practised theatrical art form and in

many ways far removed from its social origins. Consequently, it is hardly unexpected that the evolution of the dance reflects this departure from a specific community to international theatre. As Steingress notes, “once set free from its local, regional or national significance, ethnic aesthetics becomes a floating element of transnational and transcultural musical creation”. (1998:151). This is an aspect of the development and popularisation of dance both in and out of its original context that *flamenco* purists seem to have a problem with. At the same time, it reflects the increasing influence of the “Substance” of “foreign” artists and culture in both the “Function” and “Substance” of *baile flamenco*. This brings us back to Zeami’s discussion on Function and Substance, wherein the Function is the external manifestation of an object and the Substance are those intangible aspects that characterise it. In this sense, while it would be a fairly simple thing for anyone to mimic the performances of another culture, a deeper level of understanding is required to learn its style.

At present there is a schism within the world of *baile flamenco* that has existed since its “golden age” and continues to raise its head ever so often. The debate lies in the question of “what is *baile flamenco*?” and “to whom does it belong to?”. Is it a dance culture whose practice belongs exclusively to Spanish/Andalusian gypsies, thus carrying with it certain immutable, cultural qualities? Or is it an art form founded among the Spanish gypsies, which has now evolved in global, non-ethnic directions? One group of aficionados and dancers (the purists) believe that “real” *baile flamenco* is the style and form of dance that came into existence during the development of Spanish gypsy culture: that is, before it was taken up by non-gypsies and assimilated into their culture and into the globally acknowledged national identity of Spain. On the opposing side of this debate are dancers and critics like Enrique El Cojo who believe that “*flamenco* doesn’t rely on tradition... *Flamenco* is anarchy” (as cited in

Schreiner, 1990:118). This seems to suggest that the essence of *flamenco* lies in its constant re-invention and resistance against definition.

As I have stated before, identities are tenuous agreements between people. In the articulation of an identity an element of re-invention is generally involved, be it at the structural or symbolic level. One of the issues featured in the debate on *baile flamenco* (as with many other cultural identities) is that the popularisation of the dance form outside the Andalusian gypsy community has seen it gradually evolve into a universalised, non-ethnic, non-localised art “borrowed” from the Andalusian gypsy community. In so doing, it has become “cleansed”, “sanitised” or “translated” for the benefit of an international audience. While representations of the Andalusian gypsy community have increasingly become a popular commodity in a world environment seeking out the unusual, the exotic, the bohemian and the sensual, these representations are, at the same time, required to be presented to them in a non-threatening, socially acceptable package. Thus, in order to create a unifying experience of dance, “subjective experiences of the dance are celebrated but located within the wider world of dance-consciousness and knowledge” (Carter, 1998:120). It is significant to note that while local communities often reject and resist this sort of assimilation or borrowing of their culture, the induction into a larger, global identity often welcomes and even demands the process. Moreover, such “cleansing” of certain local or ethnic qualities while retaining others allows a global community to participate in specific cultures and attain a certain sense of belonging. For instance, I can say that I belong to a community of Spanish dancers despite not being Spanish. My sense of inclusion stems from the larger understanding of dance (specifically theatrical dance) as an art of skill that we challenge ourselves to master and perform with grace and proficiency.

While identity formation is often construed as a natural process, it is in fact quite a deliberate, if sometimes unconscious, exercise. In order to draw individual sense perceptions into a collective meaning making structure, individuals must participate in the performance and sharing of experiences. The inability to share such experiences generally means the loss or exclusion of this particular practice of identity from the collective lexicon. Thus, what we call the quirks of an individual's personality are part of those experiences that could not be transcribed in the generalising process of sharing. For instance, dancers, choreographers or teachers may have a certain manner of performing a movement, which is lost if it cannot be successfully conveyed to and internalised by other dancers.

Carter (1998) believes that phenomenological research must examine this process of sharing so as to understand the formation of collective sense and self-making structures. While we each maintain separate and individual identities and existences, we are nonetheless drawn to others through various, often socially constructed characteristics and qualities. Such characteristics are mobilised as markers of our collective identity (as we have seen in the preceding discussion on national identity). Moreover, those qualities that "cannot be framed within existing paradigms 'fall into a no-man's land between the factual and the forgotten'" (Carter, 1998:122), thus forming the "dirty", the un-definable and therefore "dangerous".

For example, the life and culture of Andalusian gypsies are often popularised, celebrated and romanticised through the art of *baile flamenco*. Into this culture of the "Other", we have projected our dreams of and desires for an alternative lifestyle. The "real" or "authentic" is only pertinent if it sustains our image of the gypsy lifestyle and community. Thus, a dancer's gypsy heritage is significant to audiences only to the extent that it validates (for the audience) the authenticity of the performance and adds

to the air of exoticism. Never mind the persecution and poverty endured by the gypsy community well into the last century, and the social and political statements that are made in the *cantejondo*. These are not part of our construction of the *flamenco* dancer's identity and hence have a somewhat separate existence from our popular imaginings.

We need only compare Carlos Saura's film *Flamenco* (1996) with Tony Gatlif's documentary *Latcho Drom* (1993) to see the disparity between our idealised image of flamenco culture and the reality of gypsy life. For one, *Latcho Drom* shows us that gypsies are not a universal community but are varied communities with cultures that are often influenced by the culture of their geographic locality. Moreover, we see that although music and dance play an important role in their community life, this life lacks the glamour and romance that is sometimes associated with gypsies. On the other hand, the performances depicted in *Flamenco* are modern, slick and stylish. Stripped of the stereotypical monikers of traditional *flamenco* it is staged along the lines of modern day dance and film productions. While traditionalist may argue about the absence of what they perceive as tradition in this film, it is, at the same time, an apt portrayal of the avant-garde *baile flamenco* scene and the artists who contribute to it.

From the purist's point of view the evolution and integration of *baile flamenco* in the global theatre is not entirely a positive thing as the effects of such changes have fed back into gypsy culture, thus affecting the community's understanding and perceptions of the dance. Where *baile flamenco* was once a social act performed by all, it now has an alternate existence too as a theatrical art. Thus, the bar has been altered in the performance of *baile flamenco*. Dancers perform not just for their own benefit and pleasure but the benefit and pleasure of a broad audience as well. This has

affected a kind of translation of the performance of the dance to suit international audiences that has created waves within the Spanish dance community. On the other hand, its translation has helped to integrate it into the mainstream of Western theatrical dance art. The success of its changeability in form is evident in the disparity in the world-wide popularity of *baile* and *guitarra flamenco* (which have evolved considerably) and the lack thereof in *cante flamenco* (which remains relatively unchanged).

Embodied identities are rarely as polarised as old-world models would have us believe. Instead, globalisation and migration in the post-modern world has made us increasingly aware of the “greyness”, the overlapping that has always existed in both individual and collective identities. As we move further away from the apparently distinct social structure of the *ancien regime*, we find that it has become more difficult to define the complexity of who we are with a fixed model of identity. We also see that the construction of individual and collective identities by any party is not simple, transparent or natural. Moreover, the fixing of such identities often does not adhere to or reflect lived realities. Instead, it creates an alternate truism that may or may not be received and perpetuated by the individual and society.

As such, while we need to understand the importance of that which is perceived as the natural, traditional or authentic identity of a community, to embrace these concepts without question is to overlook much of their underlying significance. As Bourdieu writes,

“too much faith in native accounts can lead one to present a mere ideological screen as the norm of practice; too much distrust of them may cause one to neglect the social function of a lie socially devised and encouraged” (1977, 43).

Thus, in theorising the perception of the self, we tread a fine line between socio-historical “truths” and the particularised, lived experience. While both participate in the process of self formation, neither are in themselves absolute conditions. Therefore, to view the history and process of identity construction as a facet of a changing identity itself (rather than an immutable function) permits a fuller understanding of who we are and how we have come to be.

Another problem of adopting the traditionalist point of view towards the construction of identity is that it rarely allows for the fluidity and permeability inherent in both individual and collective identities. “To suggest that cultural identities are fixed is to suggest that the cultural inheritances that make up those identities are equally fixed: that we cannot change the material we have inherited” (Stone Peters, 1995:210). Just as I, at twenty-seven years, am not the same person I was at five and therefore not expected (or permitted) to behave now as I did then, the Andalusian gypsy community has also changed and cannot be expected to always perform their culture in the same manner.

While some critics may lament the lack of any “real” *flamenco* dancers today, the fact is that for many people (dancers and spectators alike), *baile flamenco* is very much alive and in existence; albeit in a different form and structure. For a culture to remain alive, it must be lived and experienced, and to sustain cultural identity we must not only re-enact but also re-invent them accordingly. Thus, “translation is indeed necessary in order for communication to take place – communication between cultures and between individual expression within cultures” (Stone Peters, 1995:206). Such re-invention or translation can take many forms; for instance, museum pieces are as much a statement of who we were and who we are in that they are what we

choose to preserve as representations of our history. Likewise, *baile flamenco* can also be both preserved and re-generated through choreographic innovation.

“The historian (the body that writes history) intervenes in the creating of the past; that the corpus of history seduces us by its authority into believing in its stability; that theoretical structures are necessary in order to produce meaning but theories cannot accommodate all phenomena... The historian cannot replicate history but must create it... The interchange between bodies of the past, bodies of historians and the body of knowledge... [is] never static, conspiratorial and creating mutual significances” (Carter, 1998:121-122).

As such, both the traditional and the avant-garde approach to *baile flamenco* are simply two different ways in which people articulate their vision and understanding of their past, present and future. Moreover, both are just as guilty of cleaning or covering that which is (for them) “dirty” or un-definable from their discourse. Hence, it is a comprehension of this process of articulation that should occupy dancers, dance critics and theorists rather than the search for a truth that is mutable in time and space.

Whether we intend it or not, what we hold as the essence or the truth of our identity does change in time and space. Even the act of preservation that traditionalists pursue is itself an act of transformation. As such, history and remembrance are subjective discourses whose facticity and relevance invariably change with each new or different point of view. Roach writes that

“memory and history do not always or even often agree (le Goff), for differing conventions and technologies of retention shape the contents as well as the form of remembrance” (1996:221).

Despite being armed with increasingly sophisticated means of recording our past, we still often find ourselves confronted with differing versions of the same material. In any given dance class, one would see the same steps being performed differently by each student. This is because memories are mapped onto and articulated through individual selves; selves whose bodies and life experiences give them unique means of understanding and interpretation. Thus, while those dancers whose experiences extend back to the golden age of *baile flamenco* can reminisce and bemoan the loss of that past, many dancers of this new generation lack the same intimate connection through direct experience. Instead, their more immediate source of influence comes from a global community of performers and performances, free of what is sometimes perceived now as the kitsch aspects of tradition (e.g. the ubiquitous frilled and laced flamenco dress in loud colours and prints).

Dance students have also moved from viewing only live performances to being able to watch dances on film and on television. This in itself creates a whole new aspect in the relationship between, text and spectator. When compared to live theatre, we see that the conventions of both the film and television media have greater potential for higher levels of editing. Thus, the eye of the spectator becomes framed through their own vision as well as that of the camera and director, creating a different viewing perspective and experience. Returning to Saura's film *Flamenco*, we are presented, at one instance, with a performance from Joachim Cortes. At the end of his dance, the camera holds his final pose in its frame and continues to follow him as he heaves a sigh and walks away from the "stage". What we see here is a play in the contrast between the glamour and finesse of the dancer and his mundane, ordinary actions.

I will not speculate here on Saura's intent in his direction of this and other scenes. I will however say that this docu-drama appears to create an image of the theatrical performer both as a "larger than life" personality and as an "everyday" person. It seems then that beneath the chic and slick exterior is a quiet homage to *flamenco's* historical origin as the embodiment of folk and everyday culture. But this is just my understanding and interpretation of the text and, particularly for those readers who have not viewed the film, it is from these descriptions that I have presented that you will begin to form your understanding and interpretation¹⁶⁹. It is a story told from one person to another that changes not only in meaning and content, but in its structure, the means of its telling as well.

Regardless of the technology we may develop to record the past, we see that truth and reality are amorphous things. This is because truth and reality are articulated through and by subjective beings (us). As such, changeable beings that we are, truth cannot remain static or universal for all time. Much like the moments of our experiences, Brook believes that truth "cannot be defined" and that when "a form becomes fixed, it loses its virtue, the life goes out of it" (1996:65). The self, therefore, cannot be a static entity that remains unchanged regardless of the physical and socio-cultural environment which it finds itself living in. As such, what we may recall as true, authentic, historical or traditional qualities in our performance of collective and individual identities are subject, and must be made subject, to change (in one way or another) so as to perpetuate itself honestly and creatively over time and space. Thus, what we know as the "proper" ways of cultivating an authentic identity must also evolve in order to enable people to develop an honest self and collective identity that reflects and responds to the present in which they live. Furthermore, this has more

¹⁶⁹ If one were to read Washabaugh's (1998) reading of the film we would see that his eyes and words frame and direct the understanding and interpretation of different aspects of the film.

positive implications when we think about how we educate selves (i.e. the process of cultivation) and understand who we are and who we want to be.

Past, Present and Self

The quest for the definition of Spanish dance illustrates the search for identity in both our personal and collective lives. Indeed, the way in which we perceive and distinguish the cultural artefacts that define who we are is also our means of articulating our understanding of our selves in relation to the world. While we may choose to perceive such artefacts and/or identities as stable entities with some immutable essence as a means of giving ourselves a sense of continuity, it is, ironically, the mutability of such qualities that permit the maintenance of a sense of continuity in the changing world environment.

The fear many cultures have of losing their heritage and identity through the assimilation into and cultural borrowing (Stone Peters, 1995) of the global community is understandable. Human history is filled with cultures that have passed from the memories of all but those individuals who pursue such interests. The call for multiculturalism and interculturalism (cultural exchange between nations) in modern day societies understandably raises considerable concerns among many groups ranging from ethnic minorities, diasporic communities to entire nations and cultures.

Such fears are voiced in Rustom Bharucha's article *Somebody's Other: Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of our Times*¹⁷⁰. In this article, Bharucha explores "the politics of interculturalism in a global context" (1996:197), particularly in relation to his homeland, India. He attempts to lay bare the process of interculturalism, using Peter Brook's production of the *Mahabarata* as a means of critiquing the inherent problematics of such a project. Bharucha perceives these

¹⁷⁰ The issue has also been previously discussed by Bharucha in his book, *Theatre and the World* (1993).

representations of the Other by a foreign source to be unequal exchanges of culture; the work of orientalism; and/or a production that not only occurs outside of the original context of the text, but quite possibly without a context at all.

In contrast, Bharucha believes that for a text to be read “properly”, it must be read in relation to and with an understanding of its original context so that an appropriate cultural environment can be established. However,

“to insist that theatre represent things in their ‘appropriate context’... is to insist on the purity of cultural property, and is finally another version of the puritanical insistence that cultural identities have their unyielding boundaries” (Stone Peters, 1995:208).

Although a text may originate from a specific background, subsequent readings and interpretations of the text are a reflection of its articulation in its present context. While it is insulting when strangers make uninformed representations of one’s culture and identity, to suggest that there are proper and improper ways of reading and interpretation also suggests that for any one symbol, there are finite and determinate meanings. As we have seen from our previous discussions, the symbolism or meaning of a cultural artefact and identity are mutable in time and space.

To believe that there is a right and wrong meaning to or way of presenting a text or artefact is to invest certain groups with the power over specific knowledge. Moreover, in upholding the validity and sanctity of universal truths, we also deny the veracity of the lived experience and individual perceptions. What knowledge should give us is the ability to make informed readings rather than access to and control of the “truth”. The difference between informed and uninformed performances can be seen via the kitsch representations of *baile flamenco* and the innovations of the new

generation of dancers and choreographers and their representation of *baile flamenco* in its modern, theatrical form.

At the same time, Bharucha's call for an increase in intracultural exchange, which he defines as "the interaction of local culture within the boundaries of a particular state" (1996:200), raises a number of issues regarding identity and relations between communities that he does not fully address in the article. In proposing intracultural exchange as a remedy to the homogenising effects of globalism, Bharucha seems to ignore that this, in itself, can be a homogenising activity. Moreover, it buys into the idea of a uniformly shared and fixed model of national identity and assumes that the various ethnic, religious or socio-economic groups are somehow similar or united because they co-exist within the same national boundaries. Although very real on one level, the geographical boundaries of a nation state are at the same time imaginary limits in the sense that they have been created and designated by governments and other institutions of power.

As we have seen in the discussion on the articulation of Spanish national identity through dance, shared national identities are often political and imaginary constructions of hegemonic forces that (while based in the real world) are not exactly universally lived experiences. If the diversity in the regional culture of Spain were not enough to convince us, we should consider the status of the Basque people of Spain who have more in common with the Basque people across the border in France than they do with the rest of Spain. Surely then for the Basque people, the incursions of intracultural exchange would be just as (if not more) invasive as an intercultural exchange.

Jeyasingh writes that the "definitions of national identity are often a denial of the sort of complex present in favour of some nostalgic, eternal and much purer past"

(1998:46) which permits the clear designation (or assignation) of the individual's place and purpose in society. Thus, what fixed models of identity offer is control over individual performances of self. However, in the life-world of lived realities, the will (be it of the individual or a collective) is not always supreme, and elements always emerge that subvert or change fixed models of identity.

Bharucha's intra-cultural project, it could be argued, presupposes the fixity in the socio-cultural identity of the individual and does not fully account for the complexity in our interactions with each other and our environment. By limiting the definition in his use of the term "foreign" to national boundaries, he ignores what I believe would have been a more effective definition of foreign as that which is alien or unknown to the individual's personal experiences. Speaking from my own experience, although classical ballet is not indigenous to my cultural heritage, I do not consider it to be foreign to my sense of self as it is an activity I have participated in since I was a child. In this sense, it would be more foreign, to me, to try to perform in the manner of a Peking Opera artist than it would be to join a classical ballet class almost anywhere in the world.

The daily disciplines and practices of one's life-world contribute significantly to the development of one's sense of self. As such, it would appear that, for one to be Chinese, one would have to participate and share in those cultural artefacts that are traditionally recognised as "Chinese". However, *I* am not simply or only Chinese. *I* live in a life-world where *I* assume many different roles. For one, *I* am also Singaporean and live in a multicultural community where the common language is English. Neither of my parents is fluently versed in either Mandarin or the formal history and culture of China. They can, however, tell me much of their experience of the Japanese occupation of Singapore, of growing up in *kampong* villages and of the

particular practices of our family. It is, therefore, these things that make up the foundations of my daily practices of self; this is the specific context from which *I* have emerged and from which *I* articulate myself. Moreover, although *I* do not participate in the traditional discourse of being Chinese, my actions are shared by others like me who have grown up and continue to perform our selves in the modern, cosmopolitan life-world of Singapore.

Thus the effects of globalism and the post-modern society have not only expanded our notions of self, but they have also made its definition far more complex. The multiplicity of roles and identities we assume at different times and places cannot, therefore, be adequately boxed into the fixed definitions of the old-world. Bennett observes that this means that the

“the post-colonial body is constantly susceptible in its gesture, in its languages, of cultural expropriation. It is the body which colludes with postmodernism in a global economy that appropriates and markets exotic practices in a showcase called multiculturalism. Yet it is also the body which holds out the hope of exceeding the regulated performances of the past” (1996:148).

The absolutist insistence on cultural legitimacy and ownership (and consequently identity) is one that does not always allow for the expansion and exploration of one’s horizons and the freedom to determine and construct our present and future. Moreover,

“the invocation of a global humanism is not necessarily complicit with an overwhelming hegemonic order. The acknowledgement of cross-cultural similarities may produce a coercive flattening of that which is ‘foreign’. But it

may also, if rightly used, produce conversations that grow into a multi-vocal political agenda; it may produce the strategic universalism... necessary to linking those who are committed to change, allowing them to move beyond the boundaries of a single insular neighbourhood” (Stone Peters, 1995:207).

The passage I quote from Stone Peters invokes the cause of multiculturalism while simultaneously suggesting the benefits of “strategic universalism”. This is a risk we take when participating in cultural exchange. Moreover, in light of history, these are issues that should always concern us. Such concerns should however be balanced with the knowledge that even in this age of globalism, ethnic groups do preserve and exercise their traditional identities. I believe that because we are individuals who make up collective identities, the multiple paradigms presented by the assorted facets of individual identities does assert itself in the lived practice of daily personal and communal life. Thus, even in the trajectory of our own personal growth, we are always learning something new about both our self and about the external world and this knowledge serve to further expand or limit our perceptions and performances of who we are.

The nature, content and practice of culture and identity and who has ownership over them will always be contentious issues; and they should always be so as the formation of self is neither a natural nor a transparent process. It is when we begin to believe in the fixity of culture, identity and their ownership that we engage and indulge in dangerous ideology. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s proposition that we should seek to understand the self through phenomenology; the understanding of self as it is experienced by individuals or even a group of individuals (who identify themselves as a collective identity) appears a fair and balanced approach.

The self is always evolving and, being a permeable entity, its change affects the world it exists in just as changes in that world affect it. The self is an everyday, lived experience that, when reflected upon through introspection, recollection, re-enactment, definition, representation or discussion, takes on an entirely different sort of existence. Moreover, because of the innumerable factors that make up any given moment, it is not possible for us to re-live the past with any exactitude. As such, the self's state of being is one of continual discovery and re-discovery, or, as we have learnt from Sōtō Zen Buddhism, a state of being which has to be continually performed in order to attain the transcendence that comes and goes in each moment. To this end, the lived experience is as Martha Graham observed in her writings:

“the only thing we have is the now. You begin from the now, what you know and move into the old, ancient ones that you did not know but which you find as you go along. I think you only find the past from yourself, from what you're experiencing now, what enters your life at the present moment. We don't know about the past, except as we discover it. And we discover it from the now” (1998:70).

Conclusion

What I have tried to do with this thesis is to not to invent new theories about the self and how it is formed, but to take a fresh look at existing theories and make sense of them based on lived experiences. In doing so, I have tried also to address the perceived duality between body self and mind self and show that, like the Möbius strip, the two are just different aspects of the same thing. Looking at the self in this manner allows for an experiential account of self that takes into consideration the time (that is distinguished from one moment to another) and space (both our bodies and the material world we live in) that our selves inhabit.

Why is this significant to theories of self? Simply put, a theory of self that takes lived experiences into consideration also allows for a richer understanding of how we see ourselves as individuals and as members of a community. It gives us insight into how we develop these selves through the praxis of historical, social, cultural, political and pedagogic ideologies. Lastly, it gives us an entry into understanding how the physical self and the social self (if indeed they could be so cleanly distinguished as such) are shaped through self-cultivation (and other educational) practices.

When explored in this light, we also begin to develop an understanding of the self in terms of how it performs itself and how its actions are perceived. This shifts our perception of the self from being a static entity to one that is evolving, which consequently paves the way for an alternate understanding of the relationship between individual and socio-historical selves. In so doing, we connect the present experience of the individual with its communal, historical self, addressing the dynamics between

past and present identities and how we negotiate performances of who we are as individuals and as heirs to a shared past.

What we understand as socio-historical identities therefore depend on the constant re-enactment of these identities; without which, our socio-historical past would lose their material existence. The need for re-enactment through daily practice, social rituals and historical traditions sustains the experience of a fixed or continual identity and it is this experience that we tap on when we try to articulate the concept of a historical, social or national identity. However, this is by no means a passive activity. It is, instead, one of active negotiation through which individual and communal agendas are expressed. What we choose to represent ourselves (both historical and current) has therefore a consciousness that we may or may not consciously acknowledge.

Given the fluid nature of the performed self, it is important also to recognise that our optimal performances of self are not necessarily benchmarked to some idealised target. More importantly, it is entirely possible for the self; undistracted by constrictions of what it should be, to attain its full, transcendent expression in its everyday performance of self. The freedom to be who we are or who we want to be is therefore articulated and understood in the context that such freedom is conditional; that while there are socio-cultural and physical limitations, we are also active agents in interpreting how we face (or even acknowledge) such restrictions placed on our performances of our selves.

Knowing this has significance to both how we view ourselves and the people around and how we choose to cultivate (or educate) a new generation of individuals and frame the way in which they see and understand their individual and communal identities within the context of the space and time they live in. When we accept that

“the self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action” (Dewey, 1985:361), we perceive the social and physical world as opportunities and possibilities; empowering individuals to take responsibility for the way in which they choose to articulate, negotiate and comprehend their performances of self. In living these theories, we create the potential for the transcendence of self-realisation in such empowered performances.

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