

RESEARCH NOTE

The Arm-Standing Exercise For Psychosomatic Training

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Introduction

More than fifteen years of struggle to study and build a somatic psychology with psychosomatic exercises yielded a system named “Butoh dance method for psychosomatic exploration” in 1999, and related papers were presented in 2000 and 2003. Although the method consists of about 20 practical exercises in which the arm-standing exercise was included, only a few exercises have been explained so far in detail. Most of the workshop participants of the Butoh dance method, both in Japan and foreign countries, have found the arm-standing exercise very effective for concentration, relaxation, and bodily learning in terms of Noguchi Taiso (a physical exercise systematized by Michizo Noguchi). The exercise was first explained and defined in Japanese by the author (2002a, 2002b) after several years of testing and checking its effects in the psychosomatic workshops and also in clinical settings at mental clinics. This paper shows the English translation and some practical points of the exercise for much wider researchers who are interested in the experiential approach that the Butoh dance method offers.

The practice of the arm-standing exercise

This exercise was developed under the Japanese cultural standards: People traditionally sit square or cross-legged on a tatami mat and lie down when taking a nap. A tatami mat is hard enough to sustain your body but soft enough for you to relax. When doing this exercise in a Western country, because the hard floor is not suitable for the exercise, it is advised to employ a soft mat or cushion or to make the floor comfortable enough to keep doing the exercise for more than 15 minutes or so. If you feel uneasiness around your neck or head while lying on the floor, a flat, thin pillow should be used. The basic procedure of the arm-standing exercise is as follows:

- 1) Lie down on the floor on your back. (If you have back problems, you may keep your knees

bent. It is not necessary to stretch your knees, and the so-called “semi-supine” position is often desirable for people with back trouble. If you still find this position painful, stop doing the exercise.)

- 2) Stretch your arms wide open [with your palms facing up] along the floor.
- 3) Rest your arms on the floor.
- 4) Try to touch the floor with all of your nails in order to stretch your arms farther.
- 5) Release tension from your entire body and take a rest for a while.
- 6) Slowly lift your forearms, keeping your elbows on the floor, until each arm forms a right angle.
- 7) Keep breathing normally. Try not to close your throat when you move your arms.
- 8) Slowly lift your entire arm. (Fig.1) Don't move in a hurry. This is a precious moment to perceive your arm weight for an encounter with “the god of gravity” in terms of Noguchi Taiso.



Fig.1

Fig.2

- 9) Continue lifting your arms, raising your shoulder blades off the floor.
- 10) Stretch your arms all the way upward. Keep this position for a while.
- 11) Release tension from your shoulders and allow your shoulder blades to rest on the floor while your arms are kept straight upward.
- 12) Feel your shoulder blades on the floor and try to locate the point on which the weight of the arm rested.
*Most people find it difficult to "feel their shoulder blades". I would add the following explanation: Your shoulder blades are like a foundation upon which all of the weight of your arm weighs. It is also advisable that the instructor hold the lying person's arm and give a slight pressure toward his/her shoulder blade so as to perceive the point more clearly.
- 13) Try to suspend your arms up in the air with as little muscle tension as possible. Keep your arms in this position for a while. (Fig.2)
- 14) When you feel tired, release tension from your shoulders and lower your elbows to the

floor gradually. Feel how heavy your arms are while lowering your arms.

15) Rest your elbows on the floor. Then, release tension from your elbows, allowing your forearms to lower gradually.

16) Rest your arms on the floor. Feel that your body is more relaxed and tranquil.

17) Repeat the exercise a few times. Try to keep your arms up with as little muscle tension as possible.

When you can keep your arms up with very little muscle tension, you may notice that your arms begin to move a little bit, gradually making side-to-side movements, or circular movements. You may think to yourself, "Unintentionally, my arms are beginning to move a little bit, gradually making side-to-side movements, or circular movements." If your body reacts the way that you think, it is an example of ideomotor movement.

The arm-standing exercise for concentration, relaxation, and bodily learning

The arm-standing exercise was first pioneered and tested by the author and Butoh dancer/choreographer Mika Takeuchi in order to find an easier way to release tension and recapture liberated energy. Because only the shoulders, elbows, wrists, and hands are concerned with keeping the arm-standing position while lying on the floor, this exercise was found much easier than any standing or sitting exercise in terms of bodily control.

The main purposes of the arm-standing exercise are threefold: a) concentration, b) relaxation, and c) bodily learning in terms of Noguchi Tai-so. Since this exercise needs only a little muscle tension and slow arm movements, the first thing you do is to escape out of "a noisy body and mind under overdue tensions" and create or regain the calm body-mind so as to perceive delicate muscle tensions of your shoulders, elbows, wrists, and hands. This process naturally deepens your concentration level by shifting your attention toward what is going on in your arms, and gives you the opportunity to experience your own body more precisely.

After trying this exercise a couple of times deliberately, the body-mind concentration for minute control of your arms makes you feel a little bit tired, and makes you sleepy in the lying position of the exercise. People sometimes begin to trust their whole body weight to the floor and naturally exhale deeply. Because this body-mind condition is very comfortable and relaxing, some people fall asleep soon. (Several patients of mental

clinics told that they were surprised to find that they fell asleep during this exercise without sleeping pills that they had taken for years.)

In Noguchi Taiso, the most economical way of moving your body is highly appreciated, and it is said that only the body-mind relaxation can cause it. The most parsimonious controls of the standing or sitting position with the least muscle tension are, however, extremely difficult because there are many body parts involved in keeping the posture: In the standing position, the foot, knees, pelvis, back, neck, and head are controlled. In the sitting position, pelvis, every vertebra, arms, every neck bone, lower jaw, and head are sustained. Once you find a way to stand up or sit with little and optimal muscle tension, the overdue muscle tension is released and you suddenly gain a lot of free energy in the body-mind controlling system. In essence, relaxation makes you vibrant later on with the affluent energy obtained by this relaxation process as in the Reichian approach pioneered by Wilhelm Reich, Bioenergetics started by Alexander Lowen, and the Alexander Technique discovered by Frederic M. Alexander.

Significance of the arm-standing exercise for self-liberating Butoh Dance

Butoh dance, a Japanese avant-garde dance style originated by Tatsumi Hijikata in 1950s, needs delicate body control and unconscious body reactions for creative performance. The Butoh dance method for psychosomatic exploration and integration is the base for these characteristics of Butoh. Since the arm-standing exercise was designed to help you perceive and control your arms delicately, even to 1mm unit movement, it is one of the most desirable exercises for Butoh training. There are several advantages in this exercise: 1) It is easy to experience that your arms have weight, and the weight itself makes arm-lowering movements. This experience strengthens one of the central ideas in Butoh that it is not your conscious self but your body itself that makes body movements. 2) It gives you a sensation of minute body control and heightens your body control ability. 3) The delicate body control allows you to release body tensions more effectively than before. 4) Deep relaxation gradually liberates the suppressed body reactions to appear as autogenic release that has been described in a relaxation system named Autogenic Training. 5) Tics, convulsions, vibrations, jerk, and other antagonistic movements in any body part are experienced more easily after learning the ideomotor movements with no conscious controls.

The unpredictable and creative movements in the improvisational Butoh dance

symbolize the de-socialized body-mind that is liberated from the social, cultural, linguistical, historical, personal constraints that have suppressed the Id and its primary process in the Freudian sense. The arm-standing exercise is a good starter for psychosomatic learning even for aged or handicapped people and also for performing Butoh dance that Hijikata once defined as “like a desperately standing dead man.”

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