

Theory and Practice of Awareness and Gesture's Intelligibility: Suggestions from a Seminar*

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Abstract

This issue is connected within the context of a seminar (*Waza Gengo*), which aimed to highlight the relationship that exists between traditional Japanese performing arts and the body as a tool-resource for learning, knowledge and experimentation. The contribution opens with a brief reference to the mentioned Seminar and some paragraphs to emphasize the relevance — in the considered areas — of both the exercise of awareness, as well as the of unity mind-body. The following paragraphs, more specifically, underline the importance of the gesture — harmony and presence, movements and postures — exercisable through the unity mind-body education, for a well rounded human education. The two parts of the current issue are connected to a survey on corporeity and comprehensive knowledge led by Prof. Ikuta Kumiko, in Japan, named *Waza Gengo*: link that the aforesaid seminar wanted to highlight on the base of correlation found between the East and West studies.

Questo contributo si inserisce nel contesto di un Seminario (*Waza Gengo*) che ha inteso mettere in evidenza la relazione che esiste fra arti performative tradizionali giapponesi e il corpo come strumento di apprendimento, conoscenza e sperimentazione. Il contributo si apre con un breve richiamo al Seminario citato e con alcuni paragrafi volti a sottolineare l'importanza che nelle aree sopra considerate hanno sia l'esercizio della consapevolezza, sia l'unità mente-corpo; nei paragrafi successivi sono invece sottolineati più specificatamente l'importanza del gesto, dell'armonia e della presenza, movimenti e posture esercitabili attraverso un'educazione all'unità corpo-mente. Queste due parti del contributo si collegano ad un lavoro sul corpo condotto in Giappone dalla prof.ssa Ikuta, da lei nominato *WAZA GENGO*; collegamento che il Seminario sopraddetto ha voluto evidenziare agli effetti di una riscontrata corrispondenza tra studi d'Oriente e studi d'Occidente.

Keywords: Awareness; Mindfulness; Gesture; Education; Waza Gengo.

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1. Organisation and reasons for the Seminar

With the precious support of Haruna Takahashi, Japanese PhD student in Italy, on 6 November 2013 the co-author and I organised a Seminar for the students and colleagues of our Department who wished to participate, hosting Professor Kumiko Ikuta and her delegation as guests and key speakers. Considering the exchange of information between ourselves and Prof. Ikuta over the previous months, we agreed with her on the following title for the Seminar: “*WAZA GENGO: mind, body, knowledge and educational relations. Exchanges between the traditions of the East and the innovative experiences of the West.*” The meeting with the Japanese delegation is part of a project funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology on the theme of education to the gesture *Waza gengo*.

The research deals with the theme of knowledge and understanding, with particular regard to the performing arts of the extreme-eastern tradition that undoubtedly place education through gesture in a privileged light. This opens the way to an investigation useful for discerning the value of corporeity in education and development of the integrity of the person, crediting in the educational path experiences capable of stimulating intelligibility and sensitivity with regard to artistic-expressive-body languages.

Through this initiative, Rita Casadei and I aimed to compare two very different cultures, without assigning one a role of supremacy over the other, but rather, as the title of the Seminar itself suggests, offering an *exchange* between East and West, on the topic of education, understood in both its theoretical and practical aspects. The comparison between the cultural assumptions — West and East — has allowed us to review the theory of the mind (Ryle, 1949) — in view of the complexity of the concept of knowledge and understanding — in view of overcoming the dualistic vision of reason-emotion, mind-body (Goldstein, 1984). This has been made possible by the sharing of the respective reference models: the contribution of the performing arts is decisive in expanding the concept of knowledge, understanding and expression, and in attributing to the body intelligence and sensitivity — from the cognitive-emotional-communicative-expressive point of view (Gamelli, 1988). The Japanese performing arts, recalled within the seminar, refer to the following traditions: Butoh (dance), Noh (form of theater), Kodo (art of appreciation of incense). It has been possible to interact on this front starting from the education of both Authors to the experiential philosophical practices of this tradition.¹

This was for neither Rita Casadei nor I (Cavana, 2000) our first experience in this area. After my contribution, Rita Casadei will therefore present her research in this field. For my account, on the other hand, I will begin my reflection with two clarifications that I consider both to be useful, as an introduction, in explaining and clarifying the link between my own professional biography and this Seminar, on one hand, and between this initiative and my own contribution on the other. In relation to this explanation, it must firstly be said that my approach to the East began over twenty years ago, studying Zen Buddhism and practising yoga, meditation and aikido, a Japanese martial art designed to neutralise conflict. Since then, this approach has continued with the same initial intensity and enthusiasm, fuelled by new elements, including the Seminar of 6 November, certainly to study the ancient but in any case to characterise my own pedagogy and way of doing education which in phenomenological pedagogy have found a solid Western foundation. These are therefore the two bases of inspiration and reference for my teaching and research activities. This, as far as I am concerned, is the reason for the Seminar. Concerning the second link I would like to underline here, we have to refer to some of the words appearing in the title, aiming to support its understanding right from the very beginning. First of all, *waza gengo*. The expression was coined by Professor Ikuta; literally it means the language of *waza*, which as far as I have understood is the language of a technical skill and knowledge which express and embody a culture

1. The teaching activity — above all declined in the educational offer of the laboratory — has represented for both the authors a deepened research, still in progress, about the necessity of a concrete involvement of the body in education. In particular, supported by scientific research that sees joint neurosciences, medicine and physics, both authors are convinced of the need to direct investigations and experiments in support of a harmonious and balanced development of the relationship between body and mind. Transformation — which education aims to achieve — cannot in fact take place without the involvement of a form of action that is consistent with thinking. In this regard, reference should be made to the studies published by the Mind and Life Institute, to the contributions of Kabat-Zinn and Davidson, which represent an interdisciplinary and intercultural nature to this theme — which, moreover, is very close to the educational and social urgencies of our historical period.

(for example, the traditional Japanese art of flower arranging or the tea ceremony). Therefore, taking them from the title of the Seminar, the words *mind, body* (understood as a single unit, a *mind-body*), knowledge and educational relations; in this order and from my point of view, they indicate the referential contents and meaning of *waza genjo* and thus explain it: in other words, they stand for the fact that mind and body, together, are needed for knowledge and therefore to undertake every process of learning; at the same time, they are needed to build a certain kind of *educational relationship*, that expressed by *waza*. The study of these topics as referred to in the title and consequently their understanding, were the two main tasks the Seminar focused on. Returning to the title of the Seminar to complete my explanation, I have already touched on the word *exchange* and I feel that what said at the beginning is sufficient. The expression *Eastern traditions* was added as we knew that many contributions from our Japanese colleagues would refer to the Japanese traditional arts, which today are at serious risk of extinction, following the processes of globalisation. Finally, the expression *innovative experiences of the West* refers to us, the organisers of the Seminar in Bologna, offering resonance to the dual east-west theme, which as I said marks my own and Rita Casadei's pedagogy. So, in my opinion, this is an innovative resonance offered first and foremost because it is neither wholly western nor wholly eastern, but rather something new which embodies bits here and there of both cultures, a kind of mutual give and take, and thus effectively an *exchange*. Specifically, the practice of pure attention, with its theoretical assumptions and practical arrangements, shows, as I will try to demonstrate, the foundation and at the same time the starting point of a method of learning which shares much with the language of *waza* and which is built based on the unity of *mind and body*. Referring here to the Seminar of 2013 responds to the need to clearly underline two reasons above all: one refers to the fact that that experience did not start and end on that week, but in fact led to effective exchanges between ourselves and some of the Japanese colleagues speaking at the event (or known thereafter); these relationships continue profitably today. The other refers to the fact that the contents of the Seminar in question and returned to here in the light of our respective perspectives of thought, flow directly into that area of research and study known by the term *mindfulness*. Although this term is clearly of Anglosaxon origin, in fact its matrix lies in the philosophical and experiential traditions of oriental thought, specifically Zen Buddhism. For example, Jon Kabat-Zinn. While at the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) he attended a course on meditation and mindfulness held by the zen missionary Philip Kapleau, and having completed his studies on zen buddhism, developed a field of thought which incorporated the principles of zen buddhism with his scientific and cultural knowledge of molecular biology. This helps patients to cope with stress, suffering and illness. Today, his method, which associates meditation with Hatha yoga, is used across the world and consists in reawakening attention and awareness to the reality of things. The reawakening of attention and awareness applied to every moment of everyday life is also linked to the intense research and teachings of Joseph Goldstein (born in 1944), one of the most important US teachers of Buddhist Vipassanā meditation, which I will be explaining and directly refer to later. To summarise, these are all questions that were tackled in the Seminar in 2013. Returning now to their specificities underlines the importance of the pedagogic, educational and formative effects of such problems for both the East and the West.

2. Buddhism and the completeness of the temporal dimension of the present

Anicca, the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, according to which every existence is in a constant state of flux, opens a perspective of the experience of time which is radically new to us in the West. It is therefore starting from a conception of continuously changing reality that Buddhism tackles the question of time and goes on to add an exclusive, privileged feature of the present to the temporal dimension.

For Buddhism² existence is therefore merely the uninterrupted manifestation of present moments, and in each one we find the previous moment (the past) and the next moment (the future). We can

2. In its details, Buddhism is an extremely complicated phenomenon as, after the death of Buddha, it split into different sects and schools way before there was any written testimonial. However, beyond their differences, the various sects and schools agreed on certain essential assumptions (Needham, 1983). It is precisely this consensus that inspires this essay.

therefore see that the temporal process is developed according to an organic continuity consisting of the continuous sequence of present moments, not separated but in direct relationship to each other. Understood as *complete* time, as it contains both the past and an orientation to the future, for Buddhism the present is the only temporal dimension that should effectively interest us.

On the contrary, as J. Goldstein rightly comments (1984), the concepts of time, the ideas of past and future are deep-rooted in our mind. Certain thoughts emerge in the present and we label this entire class of thought built on memory and reflection as past and project it elsewhere, beyond us, far from the present; similarly, when we plan or dream, we connote these thoughts as the future, projecting them elsewhere, beyond ourselves, into an imaginary reality. Rarely do we realise that past and future have their own place, now and what we are now is conditioned by what we were before, which in turn conditions subsequent moments. For Buddhism the concepts of time, the ideas of the past and future certainly have some useful function, but are harmful if they lead us to confuse ideas with reality, when we don't understand that they are merely the product of our own thought processes. For this reason we are often overloaded with thoughts and worries, regrets for the past and/or anxiety over what has yet to happen. In this fluctuation between past and future, we do not live the present. This is where Buddhism aims to free the individual from the *slavery of time*, guiding us to become conscious and experiment the fact that past and future lie in the present. Clearly there is a specific discipline to follow to allow this experience to occur.

3. Vipassanā Meditation and the exercise of pure attention

Vipassanā Meditation, a term we may translate as deep, penetrative insight, is linked to the most ancient phases of Buddhism. It consists of the cultivation of a continuous awareness applied to all aspects of mental and physical life, in order to reawaken the ability to understand the reality beyond all form of conditioning. It is one of the most widespread meditation practices both in the East and the West, and essentially involves the constant observation of direct experience, using the common processes of the mind and the body as material.

The intense teaching activities of Goldstein in Massachusetts and his publication, *The experience of meditation*, already cited here and to which I will return in order to clarify the integrity and completeness of the present moment and the quality of the experience of here and now seen from a Buddhist viewpoint, are linked to this context. In his book, Goldstein places the accent on the fact that meditation is experience, a process which unfolds with the same naturalness and spontaneity as any other event in nature; therefore the author is:

always ready to bare the meditative dimension of all exoticism and intellectualism to place it in the pulsating experience of everyday life (Goldstein, 1984, Preface by Bergonzi, p. VIII).

Goldstein states that the fundamental quality for offering a strong impulse to the awareness of the present and consequently to produce radical changes in our way of life is pure attention, the exercise of the capacity to observe things without choosing, without comparing, without assessing, without overlapping our own projections and expectations on what is happening. In other words, it means cultivating a non-interfering awareness, soothing the mind by making it more silent and, therefore, able to listen, or, according to the Buddhist image, a clear, pale, still and thus reflecting pool of water.

A famous Japanese poem clearly expresses the meaning of pure attention:

The old pond,
A frog jumps in:
Plop! (Goldstein, 1984, p. 24)

There is no scene-setting in this poem, no aesthetic smugness, no superfluous element, merely a crystal clear description of the pure and simple fact. Pure attention is therefore "learning to observe and see simple and immediately" (*ibidem*). It is a highly penetrative mental quality, an awareness which keeps us awake, alert and active in the here and now and which allows us to fully experiment what is happening.

To allow this quality to develop, consolidating the ability to remain rooted in the present, this must be fuelled by practice: it is therefore important for it not to be limited to restricted daily moments of formal meditation, but rather to be applied at any time, whether sitting, standing or lying, eating or chatting, just as this short conversation between Buddha and a philosopher of his time suggests:

“I heard speak of Buddhism as a doctrine of Enlightenment. What is its method?.. In other words, what do you do every day?”

“We walk, we eat, we wash, we sit, etc.”

“And what is so special about these acts? We all walk, eat, wash, sit...”

“There is a difference, sir. When we walk we are conscious of the fact that we are walking, when we eat we are conscious of the fact that we are eating, and so on... When others walk, eat, wash, sit, they do not realise what they are doing” (Nhat Hanh, 1974, p. 9).

We therefore need to cultivate the state of pure attention on every object, every mental state, every situation. “Every moment must be lived to the full, with all our heart” (Goldstein, 1984, p. 26), as the first story of the man chased by a tiger shows, when he tastes the strawberry he has picked, despite his total predicament.

There are two determining factors for the development of pure attention: *concentration*, the ability to maintain our consciousness firm on an object; *mental presence*, the ability to note what happens in the present, eliminating all factors of distraction. When concentration and mental presence are developed together, we can achieve a mental balance that has a strong ability to *listen*.

At this point, rightly so, some may wonder if the effort of always being aware in the present applying the quality of pure attention to our everyday lives may reduce the spontaneity of our actions. Goldstein (1984, p. 31) responds to this doubt by stating that being unaware does not mean being spontaneous, and writes:

acting mechanically as a conditioned response to phenomena does not mean being spontaneous: it means being robots.

It is like saying that when we receive a stimulus, often we act unconsciously, without paying attention, and this mental state is not spontaneous, but mechanical.

The practice of pure attention is therefore first and foremost a useful antidote to the automatism and mechanical actions we are continuously exposed to. Once developed, this mental state does not fragment the flow of actions and perceptions, it does not break the natural rhythm, but rather flows effortlessly, with them, at their same rhythm, allowing the individual to relax easily but with full awareness in the present. It is in any case clear that to provide a strong impetus for the growth and consolidation of the awareness of the present in us we must increase the frequency of the moments of attention in all that we do, from getting up in the morning to going to bed at night. And it is obvious that all this requires effort, time and constancy, but must not produce tension. In this regard, Goldstein introduces the concept of relaxed watchfulness.

This dimension also implies an expansion of the sense of time, as the practice of pure attention, in its opposition to indifference and our habit of the world, becomes part of the course of life as an effect of the renewing exercise of the body which, already tired through boredom, age or original vital weakness, is always in danger or on the verge of losing its vigour, becoming dull in the incoherent monotony of everyday life. Thus while on one hand the practice of pure attention refreshes our sense of time, on the other hand it fuels our feeling of living. In *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann wrote:

but on what does this relaxation, this dulling, depend, when for too long the norm has been suspended? Not so much by the mental and physical tiredness and the wear caused by the demands of life (here rest would suffice as a reconstituent remedy); but rather a mental fact, the experience of time, which in the uninterrupted uniformity of life risks becoming lost, and is so closely bound to the very sentiment of life that one cannot weaken without the other being miserably compromised (Mann, 1992, p. 170).

To become accustomed means letting our sense of time go to sleep, and with it leaving our own feeling of life to fade. We well know that by adding new and different habits we adopt the only remedy needed to withhold life, refresh our sense of time, renew our feeling of life. But the sense of time refreshed in this way, as T. Mann (1992) states:

lasts beyond the interval, and when we return to the norm we can still feel it... it is as if we had never left and the journey was part of the dream of one night (pp. 170–171).

Once applied with continuity in the context of everyday experience, pure attention fills life with rich, different, new and therefore far from boring contents, and over time brings breadth, weight, solidity, duration through the presence, attention, care, meticulousness, interest, vitality and passion its practice demands. It is the *enthousiasmos* that holds us, which R. Pirsig spoke of in his *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance* (1981) and which is a keystone for individual quality. And in my opinion, it is only by starting from a renewed experience of the sense of time, a different way of the relationship we establish with it, that individual quality can be re-awakened and developed. And this is a way to realize the language of *waza*.

4. Restoring dignity to the *body* and to learning *practice*

The works of the seminar found a valid reference in the context outlined by the phenomenological pedagogy, especially with regard to the following dimensions: enhancement of personal experience through the use of feeling in an aesthetic and emotional-affective sense (Bruzzone, 2016) and a consideration of subjectivity with its bodily and mental dimension, not disjointed but unified; enhancement of the relationship between theory and practice (Bertolini, 2001).

The demands of teaching and education not only concern the teaching of subjects, but rather the broader, global field of behaviour, the development of a personal and social identity, an attitude to care, responsibility, an attitude which is respectful of one's own life and dignity and that of others. But also of conduct, understood as the ability to make choices which are consistent with the ideals of care, and the development and promotion of quality of life. From this assumption, we may outline a pedagogical discourse and practice which should pay attention to the education-formation of an *existential posture*. This keyword gives meaning to a theoretical and methodological solidity and an empirical, praxeological radicality. If thought is itself performing — meaning that it is formed in terms of the representation of actions — corporeity is the first manifestation of the effectiveness of being and human complexity in its being the interdependence of mind, body and spirit. From my perspective, pedagogical research must restore concreteness to the epistemological claim of mutuality between theory and practice. The results of my ongoing research (Casadei, 2017) — of a transformative and experiential nature — highlight the urgency of the reciprocity between theory and practice and the re-accreditation of two keywords: *laboratory* and *corporeity*. This leads to considering the interconnection of three types of knowledge to be developed in the training-transformation processes: declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge and comprehensive knowledge (Ikuta, 2011). The research moves along a theoretical-methodological and empirical path, marked by the following requirement: to understand the meanings and to experience them. This means a dialogical involvement of mind and body in the exercise of observing, representing, expressing (Gamelli, 2011). The results confirm the following training needs: a) to train awareness about body gesture and attention movement; b) to be guided to improve awareness of body-mind-breath interdependence; c) to have access to concrete — practical — tools to refine self-reflection; d) to use laboratory training resources to explore and experience oneself; e) to refine reflective skills on what one does.

Traditionally, intellectual teaching has a privileged position over the education of the body and health, in western educational process. The reality of psychological and physical unity is recognised only in words, in the construction of theoretical models. In the process of growth, a psychological and physical transformation, the knowledge of the body is unavoidable, it cannot be separated from the knowledge of one's own body, an aesthetic — intelligent and sensitive — understanding oriented to the respect for one's own dignity and that of others (Iori, 2009). The body must not be felt or suffered as an impediment, nor used as a tool for imposition or abuse of power. The body is the environment

in which cognitive, emotional and relational components are generated and penetrate each other. To ensure the harmonious construction of personality — including the ability to organise our own life experience according to criteria of awareness — the bodily experience must be understood, decoded and guided. First and foremost, testing the perception of our own corporeity means recognising ourselves physically: what supports us, makes us move, act and live. We support ourselves on the ground, we stand upright, we move forward, involving our skeleton, muscles, joints, organs, blood, breath and our intention. Expressing our presence in the world is inexorably linked to our posture. Learning to find our roots, allowing our weight to push downwards, onto the ground and to penetrate beyond it, into its depth; learning to find vigour, extending our spine upwards, ideally overcoming all barriers; learning to breathe, freeing our rhythm of tension and resistance, these are the steps that help us to find our position in our existence, and say “I am here, I am present.”

The spheres of greatest existential and educational meaning cannot be considered the exclusive prerogative of the intellect; they refer to a systemic cohesion of discernment, sensitivity, intuition, action. For some time, my scientific learning, in philosophy and educational sciences, has been dialoguing with my training in the martial arts and the practice of meditation. From this continuous debate, numerous hypotheses have been generated in theoretical, methodological, empirical terms, above all based on the reflection suggested by phenomenological pedagogy in reconsidering the claims of lifelong learning, education of guiding adults and therefore self-learning. This research project starts from a personal learning experience³ and spreads into an experience of historical, cultural and human sharing and continuity, developed in an educational and existential ground that is both theoretical and empirical.

5. Knowledge, action, experience

In my personal research, education through movement represents the crucial starting point on which I have constructed the pedagogical legitimacy of the bodily disciplines of Far-Eastern tradition as ways of knowledge and practice of experiential and transformative learning. Within these learning practices, theoretical knowledge — which is necessary as a system of hypotheses for deciphering, interpreting and describing — opens up to its complementary polarity, practical knowledge — necessary for experimenting ourselves in relation to reality, and giving sense to existence. Only in this way it is truly possible to realise ourselves. Gestures become the expression of our gaze on the world and intentional actions of care and consideration. The practice of the bodily disciplines of Far Eastern tradition throw us into a dimension where mind and body realise their deepest unity, offering intensity and presence to being and revealing the laboratorial nature of the human existence. Lifelong (self-) education is the design for authentic existential practice, in which conduct, thought and attitude penetrate each other to express what and how we know how to truly take care of ourselves, and, I add, only in this way also take care of others. In the light of this firm awareness, we work to create and experiment new paths of whole personal learning, to realise the goal of *knowing ourselves*, which in our tradition can be traced back to Socrates, but which is also deep-rooted in Taoist and Buddhist philosophies, and therefore constitutes a firm meeting point in the multicentricity of the human cultural and experiential flows.

Corporeity is the place of experience of the non-deferability of existence, the not delegable dimension of responsibility towards life, the space of intra — and inter — subjective knowledge, the practice ground of personal evolution. Knowledge must be practised in action, to make way for experimentation, creativity, the freedom to be. Learning as a path of aesthetical, ethical and ecological evolution of the mind and body helps to break down the stereotyped barriers of interiority and exteriority, the self and the other. The presence of body and mind, experimented on our own person, is the first step to entering a relationship of mutuality with the other and with the world.

There are three fundamental steps in the educational relationship: knowing, knowing how to do, knowing how to have done. The educator must take these on board not merely as concepts, but must also concretely implement them. The real proof of the effectiveness of a philosophy, as with a system of

3. My experience is based on the Chinese and Japanese internal martial arts tradition. Also study and practice of meditation go along my work, research and life.

learning hypotheses, is its applicability: it must be able to identify a feasible practice able to stimulate transformation.

Physical practice, the movement we refer to, is far from casual, it is coded as an art: this is the heart of the potential of *waza*. The learner enters the experience with his whole being, not with the exclusive exercise of the intellect, but also involving the senses, employing highly sophisticated ways of seeing and feeling. It is not merely on a description level, but directly enters the field of experimentation and expression: the educator and the learner mutually increase their expressive skills through a language which reveals both knowledge and know-how, directly in the action, demonstrating a command of bodily coordination, exercising attention, understanding the rhythm, listening to the breathing and the emotions. Unhindered by defining conceptualisations, the mind harmoniously relates to a physical practice, the value of which lies in the potential to transform through experiences involving the spheres of knowledge, emotion and action all at the same time. Here lies the innovative potential of these lines of research. Research is fuelled by the need to know, verify and create. This category can mainly be traced to the laboratorial approach, in which experience is an opportunity for knowledge through the direct involvement of the person in their entirety. Doing implies movement, starting also from corporeity; trying implies a challenge, an approach to the new, involving the cognitive-emotional-relational dimension in an interdependent manner. Anyone learning needs reference points for the research into their own identity. These points can be found both in the exterior and the interior dimension, including a complex, dilated concept of space, body, relations. Learning as a path of ecological evolution of the mind and body helps to break down the stereotyped barriers of interiority and exteriority, the self and the other. The suspension and cancellation of this division pave the way for the harmony and union of the individual with the world, saving from the risk of subjectivity restricted to the world of categories, prejudice, stereotype, and therefore the illusion of a defined, definitive knowledge. In this perspective, existence and relationships cannot merely be limited to descriptions, but must flourish in their authentic aesthetic and ethical experiences and life experiments where intelligence means discernment and sensitivity. The heart of this research proposal is the coherence with concrete issues such as the experimentation of the interconnections between the many constituting dimensions of the person; it is possible to realise this integration through the ability to listen to oneself, and from here open up to listening to and welcoming the reality surrounding us.

An authentic path of knowledge begins by adjusting our posture, in different situations (standing, walking, lying, sitting), as an exercise for decoding our own space, starting from the awareness of the way we occupy it. From this root (which itself is psycho-physical centrality) it is possible to follow a path to experiment the correspondence between the quality of the posture, the breathing, the attention and the attitude of the spirit. The aim is to know, experiment and respect our corporeity, and therefore be able to say:

- I am able to arrange myself correctly in space
- I am able to focus my attention and keep it alive and active in the (static and dynamic) movements I make
- I am able to listen to my breathing, movements and sounds that become increasingly intimate and subtle within me, but also appreciate those nearby and increasingly distant from me.

The references to do this are precise, coded: this satisfies the criterion of intelligence and effectiveness of the gesture; in its form we can find a model to inspire us in exercise, on which to build an authentic system of learning that is transformation. Through repetition we interiorise not only our movements but also how they feel. The body is the sensor of how we live, feel, how we are. The basis of relationships and dialogue is listening, understood as the ability to hear and be heard which in the silence of exercise develops as a fine sensitivity able to reach even the deepest stages of corporeity, to reach that region in which material and immaterial dimensions touch and mingle, creating the natural interdependence between body, mind and heart.⁴

4. These practices derive from Taoist Buddhist traditions, which together with their philosophical developments have been able to generate a precise path of significant Practice for identifying methods of evolution in being and acting, fostering greater awareness of the transformational potential of each of us and its intelligent and meaningful use.

6. Multicentricity of human cultural and existential processing

In the second point, I considered thought on learning practices developed in contexts other than the Western world to be indispensable for recognising the multicentricity of cultural processing, as Raimon Panikkar would say, “we are not alone in this existential experience” (Panikkar, 2002). The world cannot be interpreted starting with just *our own* conceptual paradigms. Measuring research into the learning processes at other cultural and experiential latitudes allows us to effectively understand the logic of complexity as a natural criterion for research, in a tension aiming to understand different pedagogical sensitivities which describe the wealth and plurality of the person, times, places and nuances of education. In quality terms, the planned path of the research focuses on the creation and experimentation of integral personal learning and education pathways deep rooted in clear training methods which can be followed in the exploration and experimentation of a universal harmony that binds man inextricably with nature and the cosmos (Magi, 2006).

This interdependent relationship is supported by the principle of unceasing mutation and renewal of time and matter. This is a universe understood as a system of continuously transforming forces, consisting of a fundamental force, 氣 — Chi (in Chinese) Ki (in Japanese) — the dynamicity of which comes from the combination of opposing yet complementary polarities of energy. In this context the absolute and exclusive idea of opposites is missing, and is understood instead as interdependent polarity, in a relationship of mutual interaction and alternation. Man is a microscopic, psycho-physical projection of the universe. The intuition of the energy running through the different parts of the body is extremely significant in medical practice, as they are responsible for the psycho-physical health of the person and correspond to a more general cosmological vision. In the practice of the martial arts, physical-emotional-spiritual training is tackled systemically, using an approach which sees these realities as inextricably linked. Attention is not focused exclusively on technical aspects, but choices are implicit in the technical aspect which are destined to transmit precise principles and attitudes, oriented to the construction of a harmoniously formed personality: sensitive, determined, focused, balanced.

While each tradition maintains its own peculiarities, they are the non-conflictual yet interdependent and complementary expression of these principles. In practical terms, they represent a multitude of techniques and indications — instruments congruent to each different situation — which are based on the same common principles. The approach to philosophy and religion reveals a strong interest in the practical function, rather than in dogmatic, theological and speculative issues. The criterion for interpretation based on dualism cannot exist in a context of universality of the existential experience, including its manifestation on three fundamental levels: sky, earth, man. The sphere of distinctions, contrasts, is not the sphere of the real, which is on the other hand marked by the reciprocity of the polarities. This way of developing philosophical systems, which generate direct behavioural conduct, may be incomprehensible, problematic or fundamental; it depends on how we wish to approach knowledge: judgement, description, experimentation. We certainly can no longer ignore it, even starting with the claims of universal, intercultural pedagogy open to constant renewal.

a) The peculiarities of the method

We will focus on aspects we consider to be significant yet fundamental, but which are also the underlying foundations of the proposed practice: corporeity as a place of experience of the non-deferability of existence, the not-delegable dimension of responsibility towards life, the space of intra- and inter-subjective knowledge, the practice ground of personal and global evolution, in the flux of temporal transformation.

We may define the body as the first door for entering a path of self-understanding and experimentation, which underlies a path of networks of knowledge and experimentation of the world. The question of the correspondence between man and the universal order reveals a symmetry between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, it invites us to embrace the learning and self-learning path as a process of realisation of an order which is the listening and harmony of the self with the cosmos: realising ourselves, realising our own nature, as in nature everything freely and spontaneously realises itself. Without the distortion of an arrogant, deceptive thought.

The peculiarity of these learning practices lies in the need to pass from the theoretical plane to the practical plane without interruption, where this strengthens the insolubility of mind and body and therefore the need to concretely exercise knowledge in action, think about what we learn. First of all, exercise implies training the attention, through the body; this is the fundamental quality for feeding any action with awareness and intentionality. We feel that this dimension is of absolute importance in a context of educational, and therefore existential, design. Being experimentable, this method of proceeding makes it clear that the way of the intellect, as an exclusive channel of knowledge and competence, is a highly fragile idea. The aim is to invest in empirical methods: learning by doing, doing by decoding, decode by assigning meaning to what we are doing. In this way, knowledge opens up to intuition and creativity, which then blends into action. We refer to being able to put into practice the baggage of knowledge acquired — also in the professional sphere which feeds and qualifies the dimension of full humanity. We must be concretely committed to action which, starting from the fact of being individual, opens up to a global resonance in which our own and others' dignity is recognised and valued.

A mind free of stereotyped methods is a mind that is free to contain and understand the multiplicity of reality, the process of forces that characterise it, the indissoluble dynamicity that qualifies it. It is the principle of the creative mind: the void that contains all is discernment without separation. This represents the ground on which all practices that are based on working (physical work and a determined attitude to perseverance in exercise) to strengthen our vital energy, 氣功- Chi Kung (in Chinese) or Ki Ko (in Japanese). Unhindered by defining conceptualisations, the mind relates to physical practice. The cosmological order reverberates on the human order and thus on the social order.

b) The concept of form in learning

Through our own selves, each of us shape our own humanity. Form is a significant word within this practice: form refers to a coded sequence of movements through which we exercise body and mind at the same time; the body's movement is marked by a sequence of positions that are representative of a given reality, as well as being both a mental and emotional situation (Tokitsu, 2004). Practice and teaching are built on form⁵: the coded sequence of precise movements, evoking real situations, within which the trainee learns to harmoniously exercise the whole body: movement, breathing, attention.

This is an introspective approach to the study of movement which, through direct access to experience, allows us to structure methods of learning, studying and reorganising our life experience. Kata is the basic sequence of the technical practice of an art.

Indeed, Kata becomes both methodology and practice: it is the method and contents of the transmission of a lesson. Kata is the method of transmission of knowledge founded on a coded gestural technical base, wholly oriented to perfection. In Kata the gesture, the act, prevails: learning and transmission privilege the non-verbal means, so in this case the spoken word is incidental. The repetition of the movement in learning has two aims: the possibility for practical application and the striving for perfection (these are also the two sides to technique in Far Eastern cultural and aesthetic tradition).

The learner is invited to reproduce the form through the coordination of his own body and the control of his attention: managing the posture, coordinating the movements, understanding the rhythm, concentration. It is instantly clear that the correctness of the movement is not the result of a forced gesture, but a process which includes the ability to listen and observe the methods of being from within, one's position within space and within one's own motor potential. Observing the teacher and following him at the same time by executing the same movements, with the same rhythm: this is an immediate sharing of time and space. And equally immediate is the willingness to work towards a formative project: it cannot be postponed, either you practise immediately or you give up. There are no situations in which it is possible to advance reservations, time to decide whether to take part or not. The formative experience is followed with full commitment: body, attention, emotion all together, here and now. Thought on the process comes later, and focuses not on something imaged or hypothesised, but something which actually happened, which we experienced first-hand, in its entirety.

5. Several ideograms correspond to the Japanese word *kata*: 形 ideal form, style, trace; 型 physical/visible conceptual form, common type; 方 cliché, module, method, of/for doing something.

Underlying all this is the exercise of decoding our own space, starting from the awareness of our own way of occupying space, which begins with the adjustment of our posture. There are precise, coded references for doing this: this satisfies the criterion of intelligence and effectiveness of the movement. In the precision of form we can find a model that inspires us in our exercising, and on this we can build a training system based on repetition, leading to complete interiorisation. On these assumptions, we can build an authentic learning method, understood as transformation. The body is the sensor of how we live, feel, how we are. Not having the tools to decode it is a real contradiction; it would be an educational failure to not rise to the task of basic literacy — at least — in contributing to our own health and that of others. How can we expect to reach autonomy of thought, choice if we are not aware of our movements, if we are not free to be able to correct even only our postural errors (those painful cages for both the body and the mind)? I offer an example from the formal situation of education: how can a teacher consider himself to be authentically committed to learning processes if, anxious to progress in terms of information and knowledge, he does not know the ways in which they are absorbed? I do not refer to the field of ideas, but rather the practical sphere of hidden incorrect postures, hindered by school desks, which few take the time to correct. Thought is influenced by the state of the body: skeleton, muscle tension, breathing rhythm, attention, feelings, moods... it is all intimately interconnected. As I am, I think, as I think I choose, as I choose I live, as I live I relate... and as I relate I produce consequences (good or bad, in myself, in others, in the environment).

I offer these questions, and there would be many more, to insist on the urgency of correct methods for exercising and educating the body to occupy space, respecting itself, others and the environment. I believe this is a good assumption for initiating authentic relational dynamics on which to build our lives. I refer to the need to follow a path of listening, which even before being an automatic response of the auditory system is the ability to feel, the result of fine tuning and sensitivity in perceiving the deepest stages of corporeity, to reach that place in which the material and immaterial dimensions meet and merge. And reach that interdependence of the intellectual and emotional dimension, mind and body which cannot be fixed in a hierarchical order of importance. Choosing is another way of saying taking a position, deciding distances, limits, relations between ourselves and the world. Taking a position and keeping it, even in the dynamic flow of existence and mutation, demands centrality-balance-roots.

If a strong technique and a strong body face each other, the technique will win. If a strong spirit fights a strong technique, the spirit will prevail as it will know how to find the weakness in its adversary (Deshimaru, 1995, p. 35).

These aspects are inherent in the concept, but also in the tangibility of experience, of a physical and interior firmness: *hara* (in Japanese) 肚 — the centre of mental and physical being, situated in the stomach, below the navel. A Western philosopher, Karlfried von Durckheim, clearly expressed his thoughts on this issue at the start of last century.

The keystone of all exercise is the acquisition and consolidation of the centre (Duerkheim, 2003, pp. 12–13).

And he states again:

[...] Although *hara* is a Japanese concept, it has a general human meaning. [...] All Eastern wisdom has universal application and seems Eastern only because the East has dealt with this sphere of knowledge more than we have. *Hara* concerns man in the West as much as in the East, not only as doctrine but as practice. All Eastern wisdom is not the product of a merely theoretical knowledge, but is the result of a long-matured experience, consolidated through much practice. There is no spiritual structure or mental tension that is not reflected in corporeity (Duerkheim, 2003, p. 31).

Practice is a method of seeking physical firmness — establishing our own centre of gravity — and interior firmness — acquiring concentrated attention, a firm will, perseverance in exercise. Straight, firm, composed are the — constantly exercised — physical characteristics of an interior maturity which is built from the transformation of the whole man as a single unit, body and spirit.

This practice has concrete, verifiable objectives, starting precisely from the method, which demands correctness, in its transmission and its learning, and above all work. In the teacher-pupil relationship characterising the martial dimension, formation-education demands the application of all our energies, the willingness to dedicate a significantly long time to the synchronous exercising of the body and our attention, with a total, sincere attitude.

Individuals need not only to grow, inside, but also to exercise physically, in a correct, harmonious manner. Movement becomes not merely the expression of control over the body and harmony, but is also the demonstration of our attention and mental presence: concentration, listening to the evolution, the change in the close relationship between our own vital force and the outside world. To achieve this mind-body balance we have to use correct methods, work hard and practice, basing ourselves on lessons that aim to free the individual: we must take our life in our own hands, and control it. The legitimization of these educational methods (using practices that exercise the body, the attention and the emotions) lies in concrete issues such as health, self-knowledge, the ability to listen, experimentation of the interconnections between the various dimensions of a person: experimenting completeness, depth and intensity through the study of precise, clear and penetrating movement. The body educated to correct, clean movement is able to awaken the ability to finely perceive itself in its relations with space and time, overcoming its own fears and hesitations. This field of research is not irrelevant, and its theoretical and empirical action may be significantly productive in identifying methods for evolution of both being and acting: everyone can and must be aware of the power they have to transform, and must use it in an intelligent, meaningful manner.

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