

MUDRA SPACE AWARENESS

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In attempting to document my first person experience of practicing an exercise from the vocabulary of Mudra Space Awareness I am struck by the subjective nature of experience altogether. What can really be “scientifically” learned from hearing one person’s account? To be useful I think we need a series of accounts either from one person over her time as a practitioner, or of a good many people with a similar amount of both experience in the work and in the larger field of performance. However, since neither of these is available, I will begin by giving some details about myself and my experience.¹

Background

I began practicing the Mudra Space Awareness exercises in 1976, 35 years ago. I began them relatively early in my career as a student of Tibetan Buddhism and a meditation practitioner. Prior to this I had a career as an actor, primarily working quite physically. This was before there was a genre called “physical theater.” We were attempting to source interpersonal communication from body language. Our training drew from dance, martial arts and theater games. During much of my early life in the theater I also taught acting, both as a way of earning a living and as a means to teach newer members of our company, The Open Theater, the techniques we had developed in our physical ensemble approach. My love of group collaboration began at this time as well as my delight in improvisational performance. I mention this data because it reveals a pre-existing passion for learning and teaching through the body—no doubt one reason I could identify so immediately with the Mudra exercises.

The roots of my Buddhist journey are more difficult to track. I believe I always had a spiritual bent and was seeking answers to doctrinal questions even as a child. However, it was my encounter with the books of P.D. Ouspensky² and subsequently the teachings of his teacher, G.I. Gurdjieff³ that started me on a

¹ Franc Chamberlain and Deborah Middleton’s “Entering the Heart of Experience: First Person Accounts in Performance and Spirituality,” published in this edition of *Performance and Spirituality*, seeks to address such concerns.

² P. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949).

³ G.Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1960).

“spiritual path.” My attraction had something to do with creating learning through what are now called “teachable moments,” although Gurdjieff’s style of offering them was an art of creating surprise or even shock for the pupil, stripping off the protective armor of ego territory to lay bare the heart of awakening. I longed to meet Mr. Gurdjieff and, as he was no longer living, I became a student of one of his students. Sadly, as a disciple of this teacher, and in his presentation of Gurdjieff’s methods, I was disappointed. Only when I first saw Chögyam Trungpa teaching in 1974 did I intuit that what I yearned for in the approach of Gurdjieff I might find in the presentation of Trungpa. The fact that he was a Buddhist teacher was secondary. However, as I observed and listened to his approach to basic Buddhist teachings I was struck with amazement that the very things that I was attempting to communicate through my developing theater training method and in performing had a spoken language, in fact, a much clearer language than I had been able to invent. I consequently developed great trust in Trungpa, both in what he said and in his manner of delivering the messages.

Mudra Space Awareness

The exercises of the Mudra Space Awareness vocabulary were said by Chögyam Trungpa to be adapted from his own training in Tibetan Monastic Dance. They are extremely simple postures and the emphasis, while it focuses on the body, is not on perfecting the body but on cultivating mindfulness and awareness of both the body and the space, inner and outer, that the body occupies and that the mind conceives. Thus, this practice hones the mind’s ability to be awake by offering space and the body as focal objects of concentration.

In presenting this material Trungpa was careful not to give too many Buddhist explanations, Sanskrit and Tibetan words or concepts. In his efforts to bring Buddhism to the West Trungpa didn’t want it to become cultish or overly romanticized but to be experientially beneficial to people struggling to find answers to life’s questions. Thus he sought for everyday human terms and analogies his students could easily understand^{2,4}. In speaking to the Mudra group he described the work as an investigation of humanness, especially of humans in a social context. He spoke of, “trying to develop an entirely new area of theater consciousness”:

But before we do that we should completely soak ourselves in knowing how our body functions and how our mind functions in relationship to the body and speech. So we are trying to bend down to the level of complete ground to see how we function. It is not only acting on the stage

⁴ See, for example, Carolyn Rose Gimian’s introduction to *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa*, vol. 2 (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), xxiv.

alone, but acting for 24 hours a day. How you present yourself in a situation. You carry yourself well, you pour your cup of tea beautifully, you walk beautifully. If you have developed such confidence in handling your body and mind at the same time, and you are not paranoid, not confused, then there is a tremendous possibility that acting becomes just purely a matter of fact, a slight exaggeration of natural fact. You do the same thing again on the stage.⁵

As was true in all his teaching, he operated on many levels at once. The vastness of his mind is inconceivable to people like myself, but basically his message to his actors is that awareness is to be cultivated whether in theater or in anything else. In the above discussion, in speaking of the exercise that I will be narrating in a first-person account below, he says, “The spine of your back is the core of your body. This seems to be the point, and the limbs are just an attachment to that. These problems begin to show how much dis-coordination there is between your limbs—your hand, your face, and the spine.”⁶

Nicknamed “The Lizard” or “The Reptile” this exercise invites a very rudimentary understanding of space.

I think that’s the starting point: to develop as if you have a tail, as if you were a reptile. In photographs of the first stage of being babies we have tails, we are reptiles. That seems to be the whole point when we’re trying to do our exercises. It’s as if we have another tail balanced behind us to make our back straight. The tailbone is an extension as such. When we lie down on our back we think, ‘I am acknowledging me, my existence and am doing so in order to exist as myself’ . . . That we do exist, that we have to start with the backbone, the spinal cord, and the space closing in, that we can only exist in the midst of space.⁷

After the Mudra Group had been practicing together for a while Trungpa did speak about the role of the audience to the performance, but again, instead of the audience being something special, “out there” needing to be entertained, he said:

I think the audience is basically you. You are your own audience. In a very strange way, if you don’t have enough training with yourself you behave badly with the audience. Of course there’s conventional stage fright and all kinds of things like that, but that’s a very primary level, you know, it doesn’t mean anything very much. It’s just something you have to get used to when

⁵ Chogyam Trungpa. 1973. Unpublished Transcripts of talks given to the Mudra Theater Group, Boulder Colorado.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

performing in front of lots of people and it is not a particularly big problem. The problem even then is not having enough self-confidence.⁸

Trungpa saw this training as a way to synchronize the mind and body, taming the wildness of mind, especially mind under the intensity of performing. Harnessing “the wild horses of neurosis,” as he once quipped, into gentleness and non-aggression. He continues in this same talk to discuss a manifestation which may occur in the fruition stages of practice:

. . . the sense of dexterity of synchronization is that everything, every perspective of your perception, is linked with the world rather than that you have become a little island. . . The first thing is to discover the awkwardness of it. That is usually the first step. Once that awkwardness is actually taking place then you can go beyond that and begin to work on it. And finally, when the whole thing is completely synchronized, you have freedom.⁹

The Intensification of Space aka “The Lizard”

The Lizard or Intensification of Space is one of the very first Mudra exercises that Trungpa presented. It is an exercise that a group will continue to practise regardless of its longevity. Over the years, I have led and participated in this form hundreds of times. There was a long period of time when the group leaders presenting the Mudra material called this exercise, “The Intensification of the Body.” Only when I went back to the original transcripts of Trungpa’s talks to the Mudra Theater Group did I discover that actually Trungpa called it, “The Intensification of Space.” I mention this as an illustration of the ignorance and lack of awareness that those early practitioners had about what they were doing. Today, our modern understanding of the encompassing nature of space has grown tremendously and it is clear, at least theoretically, that almost everything, if not everything, is space.¹⁰

Intensification was introduced to the Mudra Group with the premise that in order to understand relaxation one must first understand its opposite, intensification. By relaxation Trungpa did not mean simple loosening of muscles, but a letting go of all holding, all mental attachment to the body, allowing it and the space around it to become one thing in awareness— a practice much more rigorous than intensification although it works with the same objects: form and space.

⁸ Chogyam Trungpa 1975. Unpublished Transcripts of talks given to the Mudra Theater Group, Boulder Colorado.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For a discussion of points of contact between Buddhism and Western Science, see, for example, B. Alan Wallace, ed., *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

The Intensification of Space: A First-person Account¹¹

We stand in a circle. The one who will guide the exercise, called, “The Shadow”, leads a simple bow which I follow, hands on upper thighs. First my head lowers, then my shoulders, then the upper chest. Doing this provides a general sense of honoring—of beginning, of each other and the circle in which we stand.

We are told by the Shadow to assume the position and we lie down, feet to the circle’s center, on our backs, arms along the body’s sides. Hand rests on the pinky (little) finger- a “blade shape”, fingers held straight and together on the pinky edge. The legs are somewhat apart, eyes open, mouth slightly open. The Shadow reminds us to check our form. I check and relax my back onto the floor, dissolving tension wherever possible though maintaining straight fingers. A felt-sense of wholesomeness, of pride in this precision mixes with a sense of helplessness, of waiting for something to happen to me, waiting to be told what to do. Always the beginning feels like this and by now it is a very familiar state that contains little actual thinking. Certainly there are nuances in my feelings, some days the floor is cold, sometimes my appetite to physicalize is dulled, or apprehension about whether a Shadow understands what to do will flash through my mind, but what I am attempting to describe as the helplessness/pride combination is invariable and primary now.

I think the invariability of my opening experience must be the result of the 35 years I have practiced. Certainly students exhibit all sorts of varieties of preparatory feelings ranging from trepidation to anxiety, bravado, indifference or dullness and for some of them on occasion, excitement and anticipation. What is it that has moved my experience from these more volatile mind states? That is hard to answer. Perhaps it has simply come from repeating practices like this space awareness work and mindfulness meditation and they have accomplished what they are purported to do: create a mind of equanimity. As I ask this question I sense that some of my steadiness comes from an unconditional confidence that there continues to be truth and health in doing this work. Dare I say that my body/mind recognizes how good this exertion is for it?

The Shadow invites us to become aware of the space around our bodies, between ourselves and our neighbors, then across the circle, then even further, feeling the whole room to the walls and ceiling and also down below the floor. I feel floaty, light. As the space opens up my head feels larger, my gaze softens, widens. I am eager to get outside the room into the sky and the weather. I’ve somewhat forgotten my body but the small tension in my hands keeps me from losing it entirely.

¹¹ This account describes an experience which took place in a session at Naropa University in November 2011.

The Shadow continues to tell us to go out and up and down and I follow the prompts, imagining the outlines of the state of Colorado and the surrounding states, imagining the blue sky above the clouds and the sunlight up there, imagining the dense dark solid earth below. I am like the sun, radiating my rays in all directions as far as I can. I know my body is here on the floor and should probably give it more attention, radiate from legs, arms, not only head. It's difficult as we go out farther, in the galaxy my attention begins to waver, thoughts of more mundane things like emails or groceries flit though. I don't attend to these thoughts, but I recognize that my ability to be aware of vast space is becoming challenged by the nagging incredulity of my rational mind and a small urgency arises for the Shadow to reach the full extent. A sort of skepticism creeps in like a mental queasiness. It is as though my mind were drowning and it grasps for thoughts as a drowning creature would grasp for air. Then doubts about something unformulated arise.

Mercifully the Shadow begins to suggest that the space "out there" is becoming bounded, that space is slowly travelling back "intensely" moving in my direction. For me this is not hard to imagine. After so many years of practice the switch is almost non-volitional. What is difficult is keeping my body relaxed as I feel the intensity closing in. I continually have to remind myself to let go of automatically tensing muscles and transfer that energy into the perceived intensity of space coming toward me. Impossible to describe intense space: dense, thick, solid, threatening, electric, it feels like a pressure and could be claustrophobic save for my familiarity with the experience.

A good Shadow will begin to intensify his/her voice as he/she guides this part of the space closing in. As it is a fairly new student shadowing, even while I intensify the surrounding space I listen to hear if the Shadow is observing the work being done by the group, taking her cues from us or is simply telling us about space coming back toward us. My own intensity of awareness is greatly supported when I feel the intensity of the Shadow. By now I know the difference between someone who is shouting at us and someone who is physically engaged in the exercise and experiencing along with us that intense space coming closer and closer. I don't totally rely on the Shadow any more, but it is pleasurable when one feels one is in good hands. *She is doing well. I remain lying on my back, staring at the ceiling and imagining intense space coming closer, becoming like cement, like iron, like a diamond.* My response is coming both from the suggestions that the Shadow is offering and from ideas that work for me. The Shadow serves to conceptually support or follow the work being done by the intensifying group. As Trungpa

says, “That’s why they are referred to as ‘shadows’ because they are going to be with you whatever shape you take.”¹²

At last the Shadow invites us to turn our attention to the space intensely rising like a volcano from underneath and then suddenly it touches the back side of our bodies and we begin to physically intensify the backs of our bodies to match that pressure rising from underneath. This is a satisfying, compelling moment for me. Even if my mind hasn’t been fully on the story of space expanding and then coming back, as that intensity hits my back I tighten up my back. It feels like it is without thinking- a knee-jerk response to the pressure touching me. At last I have something to actually do!

There are some parts of my back that are easy to tighten. Arms, buttocks, shoulder blades, heels. By tensing these, other parts near to them become activated and the tension smooths out. I remind myself to bring all the intensity to my backside and leave my chest, belly, toes, thumb, face relaxed. It’s a matter of concentration and of continuing to build up the intensity of both my back and of the space pushing up against me. I use that mental force rising up to push back against. This is especially helpful where my body isn’t touching the floor, back of neck, small of back, behind knees. One part tenses and then my mind moves to another part asking it to tense. Often when I return to it I discover that the first part is no longer intense or needs to go further to catch up with the more recently solidified part.

Thus the natural agility of mind to 'fickle' between things is useful for going further into intensity from simple muscle response. It is possible that Trungpa:

... initially presented the space awareness material to performers because of their capacity for fluidity. He began by training them to have confidence in their own mudra-ness so that this confidence would eventually reflect in the plays they performed, in the audience who witnessed them as well as in the life they were learning to live.¹³

Once the intensification begins one shouldn’t back off, it touches the back and the back intensifies all at once but then the mind probes the back’s form to seek the weak or ignored places and bring intensity there. My mind enjoys this searching and filling and going further. There’s no end of intensity it seems. Always some part or other slips away or maybe it’s just that other parts are going further and a part needs to catch up. My mind loves this play back and forth and up and down. A good Shadow can help by calling out body parts: “back ribs, buttocks, behind the knees.” In its fickle way mind is automatically drawn to

¹² Chogyam Trungpa. 1973. Unpublished Transcripts of talks given to the Mudra Theater Group, Boulder Colorado.

¹³ Lee Worley, Fearless Mercy: The Theater of Chögyam Trungpa, unpublished manuscript.

these places by the suggestion, there's no mental work really required but to allow the body to follow and go further.

Next the Shadow tells us that the space above has landed on the top of our bodies and we must intensify the top side as well. Magically it seems to me that even though I shift my attention to the chest, belly, toes, nose, thumb, the backside does not collapse. Space presses on my diaphragm and on my ribcage, I tighten up and begin to breathe very shallowly through my mouth. Just a bit of intense air in and out. Some people have trouble with this but I've conquered that fear of suffocating. I intensify the air tube and the lungs and the air. Nothing can collapse. I am solid and strong, as strong as the space itself which I am matching point for point. Sometimes I joke to the class that it shouldn't take much breath to simply lie on the floor and tighten our muscles.

I notice once again how sharp my vision becomes as my face intensifies. Double images of the light above my head seem super clear and precise like having prescription glasses much stronger than my own. It was advised that we practice Mudra without our glasses, but contact lenses make such divestment difficult. Is it my eyes that are sharpening or is it the inside of my head? But the Shadow reminds me to return to my whole body and the space-- continuing to intensify against it. I try to smooth some of the eye intensity to the underside of my chin that I notice I've given no attention at all.

My organs, my muscles, my bones are solid, nothing can move me. I feel myself compacted and totally efficient. When the shadow tells us to intensify the space coming at us from the sides my form shifts a bit, soles of feet moving toward top of head and head pushing to toes. Cheeks squishing in, ribs too, V-shaped wedges between each arm and torso, another between legs, finally my busy, flickering mind can lighten up on the details and I can put some more effort into solidifying the whole of me in the space all around me. It feels good to allow the bigger solidity more scope. I am a little fly caught in amber, a cherry in an ice cube, a fossil in the rock. The universe is solid, is total, is intense, inescapable and not different from myself and now we're growing further, becoming even more like a diamond.

Sometimes pieces of my body will start to shake when I'm really going at it vehemently. I don't take this as a sign of good work but rather as a message to become more total in my efforts: space is solid. I am a solid whole. That usually brings back the firmness and cohesion.

The Shadow, having guided us to the end of the timing says to, "let it go and get up." With a bit of gasping exhalation I go limp. Empty and full of gladness I rest for a brief moment before rolling on my side and coming to standing. Each exercise closes as it began, standing in a circle and executing a bow. There's no encouragement to dwell on the letting go. We don't jump up, but since thoughts flood back in

so fast one isn't "let go" for long anyway. Might as well end the experience with a simple release of the body and move on to the next task.

Some say that it is hard to completely let go so fast, but I've never had that problem. Instead there's a touch of ego pride in my ability to roll onto my side and come to standing and execute a bow with the group. I try never to be the last one up and tend to be judgmental of those who experience a bit of dazedness. I think the letting go is an especially important aspect of the work, learning how to do an action totally, mind and body as one. Since the "goal" as expressed by Trungpa is to learn to relax completely, when this totality of intensification is let go body and mind need to be abandoned totally. In that abandonment is the real relaxation.

The world feels so fresh and focused, so three-dimensional and buoyant as I walk around "aimlessly" after the bow. My clothes seem to fit me better and my vision is sharper. I feel more like part of a whole which includes both the other walkers and the room itself. The sunlight coming in the window makes lovely patterns on the floor and I am bathed in the benevolence of life itself.

Closing Remarks

In order to keep some of the mystery of this work so that explorers can discover it themselves, I am not including all the specifics of the exercise. Mystery is hard for Western minds to accept. We want to have an explanation about everything before we're willing to take a chance on it. In *Coming from Nothing*,¹⁴ I use kissing as an example of a mystery better chanced than explained. In Buddhism this quality of transmission or uncovering of realization in the moment plays a great role in awakening the mind. Too much prior information can cause jadedness or cynicism. One popular example comes from the Zen *koan* tradition, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" The "aha" moment does not happen if one already has an answer. For similar reasons no recording of a version of the Shadow's role is made for the student to practice Mudra on his own; we rely on the moment with the particular constellation of the living group to inspire us beyond our individual efforts. In like manner the brief and often obscure non-explanations that Trungpa gave his students have been preserved as a Mudra teaching pedagogy. The timing of the exercise, although it is important for the Shadow to honor, is not revealed in advance to virgin Mudrikas even though each posture has an invariable time frame. After all, one is only a virgin once.

While other Mudra postures add challenge and complexity as well as more sophisticated information about the interplay of tension and relaxation, discovery in this most basic posture is key to all future

¹⁴ Lee Worley, *Coming from Nothing: The Sacred Art of Acting* (Boulder: Turquoise Dragon Press, 2001)

learning through the space awareness material. It replicates for the practitioner the very moment where awareness congeals into self-hood and, with repetition, it reveals fundamental truths about the interdependence of form and space, self and other, mind and matter, life and death.

If someone were to ask me why visceral/mental, non-conceptual understanding of the unity of these polarities is valuable I would beg him, as I beg my students, to look around at his world and contemplate the destruction that has occurred from having lost, overlooked, or denied these recognitions of truth. Perhaps the traditional theater can do nothing to lead its audience toward awareness. But hopefully performers trained in this discipline will in time develop a new theater consciousness.

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