Today, ballet students and professionals regularly turn to alternative training methods such as yoga, Pilates and weight training to supplement their daily ballet class, finding it insufficient as a standalone training to meet the demands of today’s choreographers and diverse repertoire. Yet classical ballet is an essentially ‘organic’ and complete training system and a discernible evolution is taking place as professionals and teachers reach beyond dance to study other related movement practices, distilling and bringing the most effective elements back to dance practice and to the renewal of ballet.

‘holistic ballet’ was developed in this spirit, incorporating essential elements from non-western somatic movement practice, notably Chi Kung (Qi Gong), and supported by the latest findings in sports research and neuroscience. Scientific research and Chi Kung practice are translated into accessible practical tools for teachers that can be directly integrated into traditional exercises to maximize effectiveness, facilitate learning and enhance performance.

The term holistic, meaning whole or multi-dimensional, is commonly applied to the field of complementary health where the essence is to address the whole person, rather than a series of isolated symptoms. In ballet terms similarly it implies addressing the whole dancer, teaching a balanced understanding of the inner and the outer dimensions - physical, mental, emotional and spiritual - that contribute to the delivery of quality artistic movement.

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1 Guss-West, Clare. Integrated approach to ballet training, termed ‘holistic ballet™ was developed in Paris 2010 in pilot teaching and research studies and was officially presented at Tamed (German Dance Medicine Association), 2010 and IADMS (International Association of Dance Medicine and Science) 2011 and taught for RAD PDPTC and BA BE Faculty of Education courses.
In traditional ballet training there is a common assumption that more effort will lead to improvement and mastery. We are typically taught to ‘hold more, turnout more, pull up more’ rather than to be attentive and let the movement flow. In sports science and somatic practices however, it is known that more effort leads to more of the same result or, worse, to movement dysfunction and diminished results. As a long term training approach it paves the way for chronic fatigue and potential injury.

With its ‘less is more’ approach, ‘holistic ballet’ provides an alternative tool for the dancer, applying the focused intention of the mind to provide strength, rather than effort to control. The holistic approach respects the body, understanding it to be an intelligent, self-regulating sensory organism. Far from being ‘lazy,’ as some of us have learnt, it makes millions of decisions every second for our maximum efficiency and well being without our conscious intervention. Our role becomes one of listening, responding and dancing ‘with’ our body, rather than attempting to control or push against its nature.

When asked to produce an action representing extreme effort, dancers will almost without exception, produce a static, contracted pose with held breath, then collapse as they run out of oxygen and energy and laugh in recognition at how unsustainable that movement was, yet this is the concept of effort they hold in their minds and with which they approach challenging dance movements. Contracted movements, as I have argued elsewhere, “are rigid and incapable of responding to any eventuality. Constricted energy is soon exhausted”\(^2\).

Comparing the effectiveness of this image of effort with the ‘less is more’ approach produces a silence as many dancers experience for the first time without effort, a “powerful movement with constant, stable energy”\(^3\).


The ancient practice of Chi Kung, or Energy Work, focuses precisely on the inner work of the moving body, mastery of energy, breathing techniques to replenish energy and systematic use of the mind to facilitate effortless extension, line, speed and precision. It respects the interconnectedness of body, mind and spirit with three foundational focuses: Posture and alignment - Breathing and energy – Intention and awareness, and is the basis of related forms T’ai Chi and Kung Fu. The form shares so many principals with classical ballet that one can imagine the Royal dancing masters of Louis XIV, at the height of the Franco-Chinese commercial and cultural exchange, were familiar with the popular Eastern movement form, making it an ideal complementary somatic technique.

In traditional ballet training the use of the breath is seldom addressed systematically. Dancers typically hold the breath precisely during the most strenuous or demanding movements, producing diminished results and a lack of power and stamina. When breath is addressed in traditional training the focus is typically on the ‘in-breathe’ and yet this conscious action engages the muscles of the shoulders, chest and neck increasing upper body tension. The ‘in breath’ is a natural reflex action and it is in fact the ‘out-breath’, the complete and efficient emptying of the lungs, that does not occur naturally. In ‘holistic ballet’ conscious breathing is choreographed and coordinated to be ‘one’ with the nature and demands of individual movements or phrases, whether explosive, sustained or transition movements, to maximize energy and speed of response. During the ‘in-breathe’ we gather oxygen as ‘potential’ in the lungs by making space and allowing breath to fill the body cavity. The moment of the ‘out-breath’ is the moment of power and replenishment, creating an explosive movement of oxygen and energy to our extremities to power our billions of cells and nerves endings. Experiencing the power of this fundamental, dancers find a simple but effective tool to tackle any arduous Adage that produces immediate visible results.

The Chinese symbol for breath and for energy are one, inferring that effective breathing literally is the key to our vital energy source. Without the mastery of the breath, there will not be the successful renewing of energy. Synonymous
with the continuum of oxygen surrounding us, is a continuous field of energy, the electromagnetic or Universal Energy Field. Energy as it gathers around and travels through the human body, can be directed and channeled for maximum effect. Energy is thus not personal to the individual but is drawn from the Universal Energy Field. Our role as a dancer is to learn how to continuously replenish this energy with the support of the breathing action. An illustrative Chinese proverb would be “we should first fill the teapot before pouring the tea”.

The renewal of energy can be consciously facilitated via various key areas of the body: through the elongation of the spine and neutral pelvis, particularly at the points of the occipital skull and sacrum. A simple Chi Kung exercise consciously circulates energy upwards from the sacrum, through the elongated spine and occipital skull and allows it to descend releasing the front of the body in a continuous circle. This simple exercise promotes the ideal Classical posture and alignment. In ‘holistic ballet’ we seek the natural ‘neutral’ moments, transition movements such as fondu, demi-plié, envelopé through retiré, temps liés, transfer of weight to create space in the body, expanding rather than contracting to allow unobstructed energy up-take and flow.

“The whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts” Aristotle declared and nowhere is that more true than in quality artistic dance performance. The pressure on dancers to achieve outstanding technique is fierce and it is understandable that training might become unbalanced to focus on external results of individual body parts such as the height of the leg, the curve of the back or the angle of the pointe, but this focus on an individual part comes at the expense of the whole and often at the expense of artistry.

When we imagine the body as a series of individual parts, this is exactly the result we achieve – a series of movements of limbs that are not integrated into a vision of the whole, into the dance. From a Chi Kung perspective focusing

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on an individual body part or part action produces movement dysfunction and energy inefficiency. Chi Kung teaches that "where the mind will go, energy and blood will follow", so to project the mind into just one leg, for example, will inevitably mean sacrificing the strength of other core components such as stability, balance and fluidity.

Awareness, conscious intention and imagination are key tools in an holistic approach. We move beyond the imbalance of isolated corrections to visualize movement as a multi dimensional whole. The mind is such an effective programmer of our movement that sports trainers today make frequent use of static, closed-eye imaging of an optimum movement sequence prior to any physical realization for maximum efficiency. This practice takes only a few seconds and can easily be added to supplement the traditional ‘marking’ of exercises or *enchaînements* prior to physical execution.

In order to achieve a stable, expressive arabesque for example, we visualize the impact of the whole movement intention and project our energy out through the entire body and beyond like a ‘shooting star’ simultaneously in five directions. This foundational action is established in an initial proprioceptive exercise with fellow students to create awareness of the simultaneous directions. The multi-dimensional, proprioceptive sensation can be easily recalled by the dancer in the future to reproduce the desired intention. In *Adage* and *Grand Allegro* we trace in our ‘mind’s-eye’ the gyroscopic relationship of arcs, curves and lines of energy as we project them out in space - balancing both the inner awareness and a distant outward focus and vision. Through peer observation exercises we establish that: ‘as we project our intention and energy, so is it perceived by the observer’, developing student’s ability to ‘see’ beyond the physical body, to coach and to master the ‘inner’ work of dance.

The effectiveness of this projection of intention and focus from the inside-out beyond the body is confirmed by sports movement researcher Dr Gabriele Wulf\(^5\) to enhance kinesthetic learning, mastery and performance, such that

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\(^5\) Wulf, Gabriele. *Attentional focus and motor learning: a review of 15 years:*
beginner swimmers demonstrate the same effortless grace as experienced swimmers when imagining and focusing on the movement of the surrounding water. Significant benefits are found from projecting intention beyond the individual body actions, in terms of balance, consistency, accuracy, energy and effort. The minimum muscular effort that ensues from this distant focus means that speed is optimized and stamina and endurance are increased. The research further concurs with ‘holistic ballet’ and Chi Kung practice in that the more distant the image and focus beyond the physical body, the more effective it is in promoting effortless, masterful movement. This technique produces not only an immediate effect on performance and learning, but also a permanent effect in retention and capabilities.

Focusing intention out beyond the physical body encourages an optimum mind state referred to in Chi Kung as ‘No Mind’: not a vacant, unthinking mind but an alert state of total attentiveness, free from cognitive thought or dialogue. The ‘No Mind’ state parallels what neuroscience terms the Alpha brain wave state associated with masterful, professional performance, resulting in a relaxed body operating on automatic with reduced pulse, blood pressure and breathing and suppressed cognitive thought. This state can be actively cultivated in ballet teaching but necessitates a heightened awareness of the role of the ballet teacher as learning facilitator. Of primary importance is the conscious choice of teaching vocabulary and an understanding of the power of words to ‘enable’ or ‘disable’. Secondly, it requires the systematic implementation of inspirational distant images and focus, consciously selected to facilitate enhanced learning. This Alpha brain state is particularly effective for more complex motor actions such as Pirouettes. As many professional

http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1750984X.2012.723728#.UdBdWz6OCA0


7 Adee, Sally. Zap your Brain into the Zone
dancers discover intuitively, by removing the cognitive dialogue and the focus on control of the action of individual parts, we allow the body in its own wisdom to find the optimum solution to the movement challenge.

Wulf’s findings provide food for thought for the ballet teacher as they reveal that movement efficiency and learning in fact deteriorate significantly in both professionals and beginners, if performers are asked to direct their focus on to the action of individual body parts. In the movement practices analyzed, teaching focus and feedback was predominantly physical body-part specific (70 – 95.5%). Body-part specific focus is shown to trigger a ‘choking’ or freezing reaction that spreads from the individual part through an entire muscle chain to produce a global movement dysfunction. A consideration for holistic ballet teachers would be the balance therefore between body-part feedback, shown to be effective if restricted to a minimum and the alternative use of a distant intention, image and focus, shown to be more effective the more it is implemented.

Scientist now turn to another potential factor of effective training, that of the role of enjoyment and joy in mediating learning. During the ‘holistic ballet’ research the professional dancers reported a renewed enjoyment in ballet training as one of the unexpected benefits. Even before the scientific analysis is complete, as teaching artists we instinctively understand the interconnectedness of ballet on all levels – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. We move beyond technique in this complete, ‘organic’ form to redress the training focus on to the essential inner dimensions of dance. Harnessing the power of the mind and the intelligence to support the physical demands, we focus on the emotion, the musicality and the joy of dance as keys to enhance learning and promote quality artistic performance.

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