

A Reaction to Shaun McNiff’s Article on *Ch’i and Artistic Expression* From the Perspective of Related Construct of “Flow” From the Laban Bartenieff Movement System

从拉班芭特妮芙动作系统中“流”的相关构造观点回应Shaun McNiff的文章《“气”和艺术性表达》

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I must start with a disclaimer: I have only been superficially exposed, through a few classes and conversations, to the Asian philosophy and embodied practices that address the phenomenon of *ch’i*. However, whenever *ch’i* has been presented to me, my immediate reaction is to think of the construct of “flow” as understood in the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System. And while admittedly a novice in my understanding of *chi*, I am steeped in the somatic practice and philosophy of LBMS. It is the intersection of these two domains – Eastern *ch’i* and Western “flow” as identified in LBMS – that intrigues me and which I wish to comment on in reference to Shaun McNiff’s, *Ch’i and Artistic Expression: An East Asian Worldview that Fits the Creative Process Everywhere*.

Laban’s (and subsequently his protégée Bartenieff’s) philosophy and the practice of Space Harmony is deeply rooted in creative process and the artistry of human expression. This is why, to large extent, LBMS as a somatic practice differs from other somatic healing practices. Much could be written about this link of art and healing with Laban’s philosophy, but my focus here is not to go down that path, but rather to comment on the phenomenon of *ch’i* in relation to *flow*.

From the perspective of LBMS, *ch’i* appears aligned with, or perhaps in some sense synonymous with, the concept of flow. “Flow” as identified in LBMS is not to be confused with the term of the same name, as defined by the author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*Flow: The Psychology of the Optimal Experience*, 1990).

From the perspective of the Laban/Bartenieff System of movement education and its embodied practice, what is defined as flow/Flow, aligns with what Professor McNiff addresses in describing the fundamental nature of *ch’i* and the characteristics of *ch’i*. In LBMS flow/Flow is considered the universal flux from which all else emerges. For the individual mover this relates to what is called in the system, “Shape Flow”, and the process of “Flow Sensing”. Shape Flow is defined as the mover’s changing form in relation to itself. It is a monologue of the mover’s body. Our Shape Flow describes the ongoingness of our energetic content and this aspect of personal flow addresses our needs to: stay connected to ourselves, to make adjustments, to self soothe, to prepare for action, and to recuperate from action. This baseline aspect of our self-flow is also the developmental underpinning of what later emerges and develops into the mover’s differentiated Effort expression. This Effort expression is described (and experienced)

through the Indulging and Condensing aspects of four Motion Factors which include: 1) Effort Flow Factor which is an expression of the ongoing progression of the movers' functional and expressive intent manifest in how they modulate control from released to withheld out pouring of flow 2) The Space Effort Factor, expressing the way in which the movers attends to their environments in a singular direction or multi-focused scanning; 3) The Weight Effort Factor, expressed in how the force of personal agency is exerted either through a delicacy or the increasing pressure of strength to overcome resistance; 4) The Time Effort Factor expressing how movers chose to accelerate or decelerate into active exertion of energy. These Factors and Elements can be linked to what McNiff discusses when he states:

“This is perhaps consistent with Chang Tsai’s (1020-1077) sense of it being one material force as contrasted to how other traditions have divided it into two principles (*yin* and *yang*) and five agents (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth”.

There is much overlap in McNiff’s above delineation of agents and principles of *ch’i* with how all 4 Effort Factors emerge from the singular flux of flow and how each of these Effort Factors express the duality of either Condensing or Indulging. The concept of Indulging and Condensing is very much aligned with the Yin and Yang concept.

But the ongoing personal flow expresses in all its nuanced substrata (Shape Flow, Flow Sensing and Effort Flow) only a part of the universal flow. This dualistic theme of the unique individual/universal is clearly linked to creative process. Artistic endeavor has always been the expression of this continuum between what is the unique personal expression (although of course culturally embedded) of what it means to be human and the universal condition of being human. The mover’s personal flow is a part of the whole of the universal flow. It is in the intertwining of our personal flow with the universal flow that we find the basis of our capacity for and experience of empathy in connecting the part to the whole.

While Western culture clearly demonstrates a Cartesian schism in how it frames the world, I do think that this continues to be challenged and continues to evolve. I would not say that the soul is always thought of as separate and indeed the contemporary focus on contemplative process and on mindfulness almost always brings up discussions of, for lack of a better term, spirituality.

In the text, *A Vision of Dynamic Space* (Laban Archives first published 1984), Laban writes:

“There exists a writing of God. It is the happening in Nature. Everything that is awakened to transient existence, that which becomes, grows and vanishes, is word and letter of this writing. Becoming, growing, withering and vanishing these metamorphoses of existence speak about the deeper sense of God’s writing in Nature. We can get nearer this deeper sense only through movement which is embedded in her (Nature’s) utterances. This movement consists of a *flow* which we can feel as well as comprehend. Art gives us images and rhythms which help our feeling to perceive more clearly the dynamic happening in God’s writing.” (p 46)

Both *ch'i* and “flow” are fundamental to supporting the range of expression in human experience. Awareness of, and access to, the life force that defines us, unites, and at times separates us, is vital to the creative act of human embodiment everywhere.

About the author

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References

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