

# Contemplative Practices and Performing Arts Learning in Higher Education<sup>1</sup>

Práticas Contemplativas  
e Ensino de Teatro na Universidade

Daniel Reis Pla<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This text addresses the contemplative approach on Higher Education performing arts learning processes, referring to my experience with students in the BA on performing arts at Federal University of Santa Maria and the time I spent at the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research at the University of Huddersfield (UK). It aims to introduce some basic concepts on this field considering the singularity of these practices on the pedagogical processes linked to performing arts.

Keywords: Contemplative Practices. Performing Arts Learning. Higher Education.

## RESUMO

*Este artigo refere-se ao uso de abordagens contemplativas no contexto do ensino superior de teatro, considerando minha experiência junto a alunos do curso bacharelado em Artes cênicas da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria e junto ao Centre For Psychophysical Performance Research na Universidade de Huddersfield. Meu objetivo é apresentar algumas noções iniciais sobre esse tema considerando a singularidade das práticas citadas para o processo pedagógico ligado às artes da presença.*

*Palavras-chave: Práticas contemplativas. Ensino de artes cênicas. Ensino superior.*

1.

This text is part of the results of the research conducted during postdoctoral fellowship supported by CAPES in the University of Huddersfield/UK between September 2016 and August 2017.

2.

Professor of Performing Arts Department at Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM).  
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0067-6727>  
Contact: [daniel.pla@ufsm.br](mailto:daniel.pla@ufsm.br)

Submitted on: 31/03/2017

Accepted on: 17/08/2017

The poet Manoel de Barros uses the term *desver* (literally translated, unsee) when referring to a type of relation with the phenomena, free from habitual standards that rule our daily life. A direct, less attached to prejudgments experience related to senses. This text refers to my speech in the *seminário CRIA* (CRIA seminar) held in October 2016, at the School of Fine Arts of the Federal University of Minas Gerais. Through it I want to share part of the experience I have been carrying out along with the students of Bachelor in Performing Arts of the Federal University of Santa Maria. Additionally, I want to start a reflection from my experience at the University of Huddersfield (UK), where I had a post-doctoral fellowship financed by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) accompanied by the professor Deborah Middleton, joining the Mindfulness and Performance Project (MaP) between September 2015 and July 2016.

I will talk about artistic and pedagogical processes carried out at the university from a notion that I call, provisionally perhaps, contemplative approach. For thus, I begin with two definitions: Mindfulness and Contemplative Practices, new terms in my research, which I approached during my stay at the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research in Huddersfield.

Awhile I have been thinking about the possible relations between theatrical practice and meditation. This theme accompanies me since my master's degree, initiated in 2002 at the Arts Institute of the University of Campinas, at a time when there was a scarce material in Portuguese about the subject. This reality has been changing since then and I happily watch the increase of interest from researchers about this theme, already with some dissertations approaching these practices or aspects related to them, in addition to articles, events, several communications in seminars, including two thematic tables in the Congresso da Associação Brasileira de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Artes Cênicas (Congress of Brazilian Association of Postgraduation and Research in Performing Arts – ABRACE) and a GT in the same association.

Despite this growth, such field of studies is still little explored in the Brazilian context, and I can say, also in a global scale. Although British and American universities have given significant attention to this subject in recent decades, they are still few when compared to the production related to studies of the effects of meditation on the fields of psychology and medicine. Thus, I have the perception that we are facing a fertile field for research.

During my stay in England, I had the opportunity to observe several practices of artists and researchers interested in medita-

tion, mindfulness or contemplative practices in a broader sense. Starting from these experiences and also from the study I have been carrying out with students in my university, I have been asking myself in this last year what is the singularity of this theme. I start from a provocation brought by professor Iddo Oberski during a colloquium held at Queen Margaret University in April 2016, in the city of Edinburgh. During a conversation, he asked where do the contemplative practices differentiate from any other action that also deals with attention?

Approaching it to the reality I live in the classroom I ask myself what is the difference between a common theatrical exercise, which also presupposes an attentive perception, and another exercise that is established in the context of contemplative practices? Would theater and performance *per se* be contemplative practices? Would there be an epistemological proposal in the contemplative arts term?

Robert Hattam and Bernardette Baker (2016) treat in their article “Technologies of Self and The Cultivation of Virtues” about a contemplative turn in contemporary society. They affirm that this turn refers to the increasing interest in contemplative practices such as meditation and mindfulness practice, which imply in actions of the subjects over themselves aiming an ontological change. The turn is situated in a territory of interference and, sometimes turbulence, between political and economic forces that organize our actions and the alleged contemplative traditions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, *Pajelanças*, *Candomblé*<sup>3</sup>, Hinduism, among many other spiritual lineages that can be cited here.

Contemplative turn invites us to review the instrumentalist approach, guided by debates of modern science increasingly challenged to reconsider its practices and submission of the bodies to the post-industrial capitalist model. Thereby, this turn focuses on the discussion of ethics and philosophy as modes of existence and spirituality as a relevant theme to the research. Spirituality is understood here according to Foucault in his book “The Hermeneutics of the Subject”, who relates this notion to care of self, being defined as:

[...] these pursuits, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etcetera, which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth (FOUCAULT, 2005, p. 23).

Thus, spirituality is formed in what Foucault defines as technologies of the self, arts and aesthetics of existence, practices that

3. Translator's note – *Pajelanças* is a ritual from Brazil's indigenous people. It consists of ritual performed by the *pajé* (healer and spiritual leader of a tribe) that aims heal the people of the community or solving their spiritual problems. Regarding the *Candomblé*, it is a Brazilian religion based on African traditions brought to Brazil by the slaves; followers of this religion worship the *orixás*, who are deities that represent the Nature's forces.

allow the subjects the knowledge of themselves and the world in a perspective in which the separation between subject and object, observer and observed, is relativized. Virgínia Kastrup, in her speech during the CRIA seminar in October 2016, states that these practices prove the forces that constitute us and the ones that constitute the world. This perspective even questions the notion of individual as monad, essence, inviting us to look at phenomena such as networks, You and I as set of forces that interfere, block and stimulate.

Hattam and Baker (2016) also speak about arts of existence as actions that are not characterized by the blind adoption of specific behaviors, but that aim to produce changes and recognize singularities in the selfsame individual, approaching life as work of art, or yet, art as production of modes of existence (BOURRIAUD, 2011).

Therefore, technique, exercises, actions carried out in the classroom/rehearsal can be seen as practices of creation and cultivation of singularities, practices of freedom, at last. Artistic and pedagogical work, in this view, becomes an exercise of attention whose objectives exceed issues exclusively related to applicability and production, its influence exceeds the boundaries of the work-room or theater.

Currently, mindfulness practice has received attention by different researchers around the world. In this text I will use the term mindfulness with concern to meditation because this has been the most popular term when covering the theme in different countries, relating this practice to the methodology proposed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who became famous when adapting methods used in the Buddhist context to lay public and scientific community of the United States.

Jan Chozen Bays defines mindfulness as the ability of voluntary attention present in all human beings, which can be exercised and improved. It is the ability to be aware of the processes that occur in the body, feelings and thoughts, and also of what happens beyond the skin, the various phenomena that constitute the environment in which we are immersed. One of the most common definitions of this practice, present in different writings, is the one that states mindfulness as awareness without judgment or criticism. A form of basic, structural, prerational attention, a base where the alleged conscience is formed.

Mindfulness also refers to a tool applied with the aim of improvement of attention and management of afflicting mental states, increasingly used in schools, hospitals and currently recommended by the British government as one of the complementary therapies offered by the National Health System (NHS)<sup>4</sup>.

4. And more recently, starting from March 2017, it will be offered by the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS).

As therapeutic procedure, this practice originates in the decade of 1970 from the field of behavioral medicine with Jon Kabat-Zinn, doctor of the University of Massachusetts Medical School. In this hospital he developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) method that is currently used around the world.

In the expansion process of the MBSR, different courses of mindfulness meditation or based on this practice proliferated with the most different objectives. There are courses for entrepreneurs, collaborators of companies, students, teachers, soldiers, police officers, among others. The technique effectiveness of mindfulness and MBSR method has been proven by thousands of people who have been using it, as well as by studies in the fields of neurobiology and psychology, which show the benefits of this practice for depression control, anxiety reduction, strengthening of the immune system, to name a few of the benefits cited.

Many of these courses relate the stress reduction and attention improvement to increase of workers' productivity, producing a phenomenon defined by Purser & Loy as "McMindfulness". They state:

While a stripped-down, secularized technique — what some critics are now calling "McMindfulness" — may make it more palatable to the corporate world, decontextualizing mindfulness from its original liberative and transformative purpose, as well as its foundation in social ethics, amounts to a Faustian bargain. Rather than applying mindfulness as a means to awaken individuals and organizations from the unwholesome roots of greed, ill will and delusion, it is usually being refashioned into a banal, therapeutic, self-help technique that can actually reinforce those roots. (PURSER, LOY, Huffington Post, Aug. 31, 2013)

Criticism here refers to the separation of the mindfulness practice from its ethical roots. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2013) proposes an approach based on canonical definitions of the practice of full attention, expanding the idea of mindfulness as attention without judgment, popularized by the mass media, to the notion of reflective contemplation of individual experience, lead by objective domains of body, feelings, mental states and experience of the subject with phenomena. In this perspective, mindfulness would be a repeated return to object observation, aiming a deep and clear comprehension of it (*sampajāñna*). Attention here does not exclusively refer to the ability of maintaining for a longer or shorter time an object in the focus of our consciousness, but of, through concentration of attention, subject the phenomenon to analysis, observing its constitution,

the forces that constitute and affect it, thus aiming to correct inaccurate views and overcome obstacles that affect the way we perceive and react.

Clearly understanding, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi (2013, p. 20), implies not only on phenomena observation, but also in their interpretation so that we can put them in a context that provides them meaning and significance. Thus, it is an active process of giving meaning to existence.

Capacity for attention sustained at one point allows us to see the fluctuations of perception. We look at the object of concentration and, in the process of enlightening it with our consciousness, it becomes possible to perceive an aura consisting of everything that passes through our thoughts, emotions, strongest sensations present in the body. In this hidden flow, it is found the opportunity of discovering new possibilities of existence, of *desver* (unsee).

Mindfulness practice occupies a prominent role in contemplative approaches of education and art, even though the term “contemplative practices” covers more than this particular practice.

According to Barbezat and Bush (2014), contemplative practices, when related to pedagogy, imply in actions that enables to the subject the opportunity of reflection and introspection. It is about practices focused on students and creation of strategies that allow them the introspection and cultivation of self-awareness and relations with others. The center of these practices is meditation, understood in its broader sense and not merely as a specific technique. Contemplative practices involve both non-judgmental observation and periods of analytical thinking, keeping the focus on first-person experience and awareness of automatic reactions that arise throughout the practice.

Objectives of contemplative practices are varied, emphasizing the improvement of the ability of keeping sustained attention over one point; reflection on the themes proposed in the classroom/rehearsal by deepening their understanding of the subject and its relation with its own experiences; exercise of compassion and connection to others accompanied by deepening of moral and spiritual senses of education; investigation of individual mental processes, personal senses, creative ability and insight (BARBEZAT, BUSH, 2014, p. 11).

Regarding the ideas exposed by Bhikkhu Bodhi that mindfulness practice, more than a tool used to enhance the effectiveness of action, is also the practice of creating subjectivities, senses of/to existence, we can infer that contemplative practices, mindfulness ones included, can be understood as *Bhavana*, cultivation of self (QUILICI, 2006).

I begin learning new stretching exercises, which help me rest my unsettled mind in the workplace, as if my mind were an aircraft amid several clouds of problems. Exercises take me away from these clouds and pull me back to earth, to the present moment. When I make myself present, I recognize my body and deficiencies, which I usually forget since they are stagnant. However, as soon as I start the exercises I gradually discover new deficiencies, *malesas* (injuries), besides remembering that I have feet, knees, thighs, arms, etc... and every bone that belongs to them, paying attention to the breathing (Student logbook, 2014).

Considering the practice I have been carrying out with my students, the first point is returning to live in our own house, to bring awareness to the body and its processes. When relating meditation to theater, I mean a theatrical practice that aims in attentive action and recognition of habitual patterns an exercise of direct perception. I could say, to cultivate through art an awake and singular mode of existence, not distracted or disperse, less determined by habit and docility of bodies and minds. In this process it is important to act aiming the deautomatization of body, perception and thought, but also the way we perceive and understand the world.

Theatrical practice thus becomes practice of awakening, with two directions of understanding. The first, the awakening to “*malesas* (injuries), besides remembering that I have feet, knees, thighs, arms, etc... and every bone that belongs to them, paying attention to the breathing” (Student’s Journal, 2014). Hence, to refine the perceptions in order to recognize the mental blocks and potentialities of the body and, thereby, acquire awareness of flows of thoughts, impulses, emotions and interference that cross the person in a specific time and place. However, becoming aware of the “*malesas*” is not enough, we need to act on them in order to overcome what prevents the creation, recognizing and nurturing flows and potentialities that facilitate the creative process.

The second sense of awakening refers to recovery of the ability of wonderment with the world, which sustains a curious look, not addicted by habitual patterns of action, thought and feeling. Thus, the practice of classroom/rehearsal can be presented as an effective system for the deautomatization of perception, a way to recognize the habitual patterns of behavior, thoughts, perceptions and feelings and, this stated, to be not determined by that that reduces our potentialities.

When using stretching exercises as means of self-investigation, the student reports an initial moment in which she makes contact with her body, creating a break in the identification with

her flow of thoughts, turning to the sensations. In this process, she could get in touch with subtle layers of experience: previously unseen “*malesas*”, recognition of the stream of consciousness and its contents.

In a contemplative approach, regarding the way I understand it from the practice with students, exercises are research tools of psychophysics processes. In the work I have been carrying out it is given through the deepening of the relationship of actors with their own body by the observation of different physical sensations that compose their corporeality and, thereby, exploration of the relation between sense and mental processes such as memory, concepts and images.

Thus, I prioritize the body as territory of exploration, starting and arrival point of creation, crossed by drives, images, sensations and weight; a body of flesh permeated by another body, made of memories, feelings, thoughts and associations. A body made of consciousness and history.

In the process of recognizing the particularities that constitute each person, paying attention to what generates or suppresses freedom and creation, a possibility is opened. Possibility of individuals *desver* (unsee) themselves, of establishing a new relationship with themselves, with others and space.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (2002), Buddhist professor who was one of the precursors of Buddhism in North America, sets neurosis as the set of ideas and behavior patterns that prevent the person to connect more directly with reality. According to him, these patterns that end up preventing healthier relationships and construction of a more balanced society. For him, overcoming of automatisms in both corporal and mental processes levels, allows the construction of subjectivities more compromised with empathy and freedom. Objective of art that is born from serious meditative experience would be, thereby, the creation of a more positive social reality for all. A society committed to values related to life and cooperation, more than the profit and competitiveness.

Although this does not exhaust the subject, I think the commitment to build an enlightened society, using the Trungpa term, is a point that can help think what makes natural contemplative practices when inserted in the context of teaching at the college level. Working with them implies not only the pursuit of a more focused and sustained attention for a longer time; neither refers to a kind of body knowledge and processes associated with it in order to improve productivity; rather, the exercise of contemplative art, or the use of contemplative practices in theatrical pedagogy, refers to considering the artistic-pedagogical action as an instrument of

investigation of oneself and the surrounding reality, constructing a knowledge that is proper to art. The development of attention and the greater awareness of the unique processes of each person become means to produce spaces of creative freedom, spaces for not seeing, facilitating the creation of subjectivity, considering the artist's responsibility and the power of his action as factors of social transformation. In order to overcome the perception patterns and habitual action from the work of art, which in a larger scale is reflected in the creation of healthier communities, understood as spaces for the empowerment of life.

## REFERENCES

- BARBEZAT, Daniel; BUSH, Mirabai. **Contemplative Practices in Higher Education**. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014.
- BIKKHU BODDHI. What does mindfulness mean? A canonical perspective IN: WILLIAMS, J. Mark G; KABAT-ZINN, Jon. (ed) **Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives on its meaning, origins and applications**. London & New York: Routledge, 2013.
- BOURRIAUD, Nicolas. **Formas de Vida: A Arte Moderna e a Invenção de Si**. Tradução de Dorothée de Bruchard. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2011.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. **The Hermeneutics of the subject: lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982**. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Plagrave McMillan, 2005.
- HATTAM, Robert; BAKER, Bernardette. Technologies of Self and The Cultivation of Virtues IN: ERGAS, Oren; TODD, Sharon (Ed.). **Philosophy East/West: Exploring Intersections Between Educational and Contemplative Practices**. Sussex (UK): Willey Blackwell, 2016. (versão Kindle)
- PLÁ, Daniel Reis. **Sobre Cavalgar o Vento: contribuições da meditação budista no processo de formação do ator**. Tese de Doutorado. Campinas: Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2012.
- PURSER, Ron; Loy, David. **Beyond Mmindfulness**. The Huffington Post. Ed. 31 de agosto de 2013. Acessível em [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness\\_b\\_3519289.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html). Último acesso em 31 de março de 2017.
- QUILICI, Cassiano Sydow. **A meditação e a questão da “técnica” no mundo atual**. Comunicação apresentada no I Colóquio sobre o pensamento japonês promovido pela Fundação Japão, em 28 de Setembro de 2006.
- TRUNGPA, Chögyam. **Além do Materialismo Espiritual**. Tradução de Octavio Mendes Cajado. São Paulo: Cultrix, 2002.
- TRUNGPA, Chögyam; LIEF, Judith L. (Ed). **True Perception: The path of Dharma Art**. Boston: Shambhala publications, 2008.