

# Luminous Neutrality in The Art of Walking Backward

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**Abstract** | This essay develops performatively through somatic research related to conscious listening in verbal and embodied communication. The poesis ensues from phenomenology, butoh, and Zen, explaining butoh as a protest form of dance and therapy with origins in mid-20th Century Japan and still continuing today. On walking back, the text slips inward—awakening matters of environmental precarity and a somatic ethic of planetary care.

**KEYWORDS:** Walking. Communication. Somatic Care.

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**Neutralidade luminosa na arte de caminhar para trás**

**Resumo** | Este ensaio desenvolve-se performativamente por meio de pesquisas somáticas relacionadas à escuta consciente na comunicação verbal e corporificada. A poesis decorre da fenomenologia, do butô e do Zen, explicando o butô como uma forma de protesto de dança e terapia com origens no Japão de meados do século XX até os dias atuais. Ao caminhar para trás, o texto desliza para dentro – despertando questões de precariedade ambiental e uma ética somática de cuidado planetário.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Caminhar. Comunicação. Cuidado somático.

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**Neutralidad luminosa en el arte de caminar hacia atrás**

**Resumen** | Este ensayo se desarrolla performativamente a través de investigaciones somáticas relacionadas con la escucha consciente en la comunicación verbal y corpórea. La poesis surge de la fenomenología, el butoh y el zen, explicando el butoh como una forma de danza y terapia de protesta con orígenes en el Japón de mediados del siglo XX y que aún continúa en la actualidad. Al regresar, el texto se desliza hacia adentro, despertando cuestiones de precariedad ambiental y una ética somática del cuidado planetario.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Caminar. Comunicación. Atención somática.

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Submitted in: 10/16/2022  
Accepted in: 11/29/2022  
Published in: 12/14/2022

Today I explored walking slowly backward in a circle while listening to small details of bodily awareness. The process allowed me a multidimensional view of my immediate environment, which prepared me to walk backward in a more or less linear fashion. *My back pain eased as I walked back, rolling my feet from front to back*, taking weight first through the toes, the front ball of the foot, and then back to the heels. This new orientation completely reversed the weight-bearing habits of a forward walk, where the heel reaches forward and takes weight first, then transfers it toward the toes. This five-minute exploration changed my postural habits for a time and thus the holding patterns of my spine, allowing me the calm to listen to my body and breathe deeply.

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This essay develops performance practices related to somatic themes of conscious listening, whether listening to foot movement and resulting changes in the spine or listening to others in verbal and embodied communication. It stems partly from methods of performance as research, introduced in the extensive work of Lynette Hunter and Shannon Rose Riley<sup>1</sup>. The performative writing of this essay also enlists phenomenology, *butoh*, and Zen, explaining *butoh* as a protest form of dance with origins in mid-20th Century Japan and present-day continuities. On walking back, the text stumbles toward an inward glance—awakening matters of environmental precarity and a somatic ethic of planetary care.

Several questions ruminate in the essay's title: What is art? Why this backward glance? Is there art and luminosity in walking backward? And why neutrality? Definitions of somatics, and movement somatics, in particular, bump up against these questions. The field of somatics isn't easy to explain. I understand it in self-other relationships of embodiment, movement awareness, and wellness—and none of these are tangible things. Is it possible, then, that simple acts of attention like walking backward can encourage health and wellness? Or can backward steps relieve pain, as I suggest in the opening paragraph?

And why neutrality, which would seem the opposite of luminosity? I introduce neutrality as a somatic value because it suggests a sensory state that is not needy or greedy. Neutrality uses less effort; it is complete and has enough. Related Zen sensitivities, like nonattachment and impartiality, also come to mind. A neutral stance in the body seeks a place of balance that won't fall over, even as it might bend and flow into movement. When I use the word "somatics," I usually refer to movement somatics in dance and theater arts since other fields, such as neurobiology, psychology, leadership, and literature, also use the term. I relate *somatic neutrality* to Antonio Damasio's work on *homeostasis*, a feeling of well-being that finds places of balance and rest in the body (DAMASIO, 2018). In movement processes, neutrality is an essential ingredient. For the mover, it allows ease in directionality to develop: from neutral, one can move easily in any direction and not be pinned down to one. Thus, we might as well go backward as forward, which is not easy, as we don't have eyes in the back of our heads.

Then, why walk backward in such an inefficient, dangerous direction? First, purely because the body has a back and a front. Since the back of the body and

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is dedicated to my colleague Shannon Rose Riley for her groundbreaking work on practice as research. **See** RILEY; HUNTER, 2014.

what is behind us stay in the background, it is crucial to cultivate a dimensionality that illuminates backspace or *backness*, if you will. This imperative is a matter of awareness and inclusion, both psychophysical and historical. History sounds out the past, “the storied past” behind us, and foregrounds “future stories” of our becoming. Including backness reveals a fuller record of acoustic possibilities.

## Phenomenology

As a philosophical method, phenomenology asks us to pay attention to ignored or opaque elements of existence and to renew our look at life through unbiased awareness, “zeroing” to learn something new or attain new knowledge. Luminosity, or “shedding light”, is often a metaphor for this discovery mode of thinking in phenomenology. For me, luminous breakthroughs can denote mystery and awe, more often the down-to-earth sort—“awe”, as in “awesome”.

When my daughter first drove our car around the neighborhood, she came to an easy halt and looked at me: “totally awesome”, she said with a glow. Suddenly the world was her oyster. She caught a vision of her teenage self that could expand and become more through the simple yet awesomely complex process of driving. She was moving and moving on with wings. By herself, she would drive across the entire USA in a few years and see America on her terms, an accomplishment she is happy to recount. Backing up the car, however, is more complicated than moving forward, and she had to learn that, as well as how to parallel park with perils of backing up diagonally, seeing in front, to the side, and back across. Driving, like life, requires a multidimensional view. Those of us who have been driving for many years often forget that.

How about walking backward without wheels? Going backward, moving, and dancing backward have many possible versions and can also be awesome. Ginger Rogers did it in high heels and while smiling. Stepping back refreshes the senses and renews perception as we reverse usual orientations and habitual momentum. Walking backward is not easy as we pass through a middle ground and ease toward the unknown with its shadows.

To go back, we pass through the middle and hit reverse. We stop and park at moments to get our bearings. Walking backward is a similar accomplishment that also revitalizes the body and risks darkness in the myriad ways we live it. Moving back slows us down and is often reasonably necessary for the nervous system. Going back into memory, somatically relaxed and not stressed, can ease past hurts. Stress and trauma have a chance to surface and release. Intuitive multidirectional dance improvisations also offer this possibility of relief, mainly when they include shifts toward neutral. Neutral gears in a car and the human psyche are required for these and other reasons—simply for not going anywhere; then, resting and reassessing; importantly, just hanging out with homeostasis while feeling good; waiting for illumination—backing up, and perchance (if we are ready to dance into darkness) smearing our butoh-bodies with mud.

## Butoh

The great Japanese butohist Ohno Kazuo put the somatic question of mud and shadows this way in his dance workshops: “Don't push away the messiness of

life", but he also cautioned against inviting ugliness. "There is enough ugliness in life", he taught. Flowers were his favorite form of life. He pointed to a reality that sees beauty in acceptance and awkwardness. Relative to this, he explored beautiful ugliness in dance, stepping away from expectations of perfection to cultivate luminous neutrality. On my first visit to Ohno's studio, I asked my translator and friend what Ohno was whispering in students' ears as they moved in odd slow ways: "Whatever they are doing, Ohno asks them to do the opposite", she answered<sup>2</sup>.

Ohno's butoh tends toward dispassionate neutrality, even when it gets gritty and messy. Experiencing mud through the mirage of backspace can be luminous. Ohno taught that the back of the body was more expressive than the front. Butoh is the ugly beautiful form of dance that developed in Japan through social crisis and aesthetic innovation after World War II. Its main progenitor, Hijikata Tatsumi, sought to rescue the Japanese body from Western encroachment and American colonization of Japan after the war. Hijikata's dance protested the progressive values of production as he turned back the clock to draw upon nativist Japan and the muddiness of his rural home in Tohoku. "I come from the mud", he said most famously. The achromatic aesthetic turn of butoh in the influential work of Hijikata and Ohno teaches that to recover the cultural body and heal somatically, we need to slow toward Eastern wisdom, speed toward Western passion, and brave uncomfortable truths<sup>3</sup>. Butoh and Kabuki critic Masakatsu Gunji factiously called Ohno and Hijikata "fallen Western dancers returned to Japan" since they had studied Western modern dance and its inspired creativity<sup>4</sup>.

I continue to learn through the evocative backward glance of butoh. This form of dance theater and healing is not progressive. If butoh could speak, it would say, "the world is going nowhere". This is not a quiescent position or uncaring; it simply states that what we value as art may be questioned. Is new better than old? Should we erase art periodically to begin again? What might emerge from a lack of art? Not knowing? Letting go? Reimagining beauty? Seeing what is behind and in front? Illuminating the present?<sup>5</sup>

### **Stumbling: The Unplanned Character of Time**

The somatic ethos I hope to invite lives in slow time and patience, not progress—but a step back in admitting imperfections as modeled in butoh aesthetics. I question the human overreach of artful perfection and mastery because the affinity for controlling everything has consequences for personal and planetary wellness. Controlling instincts of endless progress propel our attempts to master nature, wresting from it all we can. Human hopes of mastering nature create pollution and threaten all life. Similarly, mastery is an endpoint in the annals of art and education. Suddenly there is only accomplishment and nothing new to learn or create. In renewal and reflection, might we see the difference between mastery and excellence? I seek edges between these lofty possibilities—those that hone well-doing, well-being, and far-seeing, not subordination.

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<sup>2</sup> Kazuo Ohno butoh workshops, Yokohama, Japan, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the lives, words, and works of these butoh founders, see FRALEIGH; NAKAMURA, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> For more context on Gunji's statement, see FRALEIGH, 2010, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Butoh's inherent philosophy carries these ideas further. See especially the section "Is butoh a philosophy" (FRALEIGH, 2010, p. 63-78).

### **Performing Balance**

*I invite you to balance control and loss in a backward step.*

*Gravity will be involved as you find your footing.*

*Notice any bodily sensations that arise in your exploration.*

*Your steps don't need to be perfect,*

*Just find your way back.*

*Go slowly, and move without fear.*

I have acquired a taste for indeterminacy from Zen and my dance studies with Merce Cunningham. My enthusiasm for indeterminacy through the admission of weakness ensues from the precarity of butoh as it grew in the suffering and reconstruction of Japan amid the ashes and devastation of war. Butoh is antiheroic and descendant, a performance of listening ready to crumble.

Today we need to listen in the face of environmental precarity, as we find ourselves at fault for destroying the very air we breathe. If we treat nature as an endless resource for human use, we risk our bodies through digging, extracting, and wasting. What if we could empty ourselves of overdrives so that life might yield its present-time gifts? What if we already had enough without needing more? Somatic intersections with environ-mentality speak to issues of commanding mastery, especially as we live these bodily. Might we step aside and back and away from mastery? Would we invite vulnerability, then? Or might we at least acknowledge that human and other life enters and exits this life span in vulnerable states?

I like to dance backward, knowing I am materially and metaphysically entangled with my environment and its perils, even as I can't see behind myself in the limited turn of my head. Walking back is good practice for metaphysical musings. Last night I walked into the darkness to rescue my small dog, barking wildly at who knows what. She was distressed by an intruder who had entered our backyard at night, a cat, maybe, or a skunk, but I couldn't tell; it was too big. My doggie was mesmerized and immovable, but I somehow got her into the house. This brief incident reminds me that stepping into invisibility challenges sense perception and requires presentness.

And I wonder if encountering the dark can renew a metaphysical sense of what forward means in unpredictable conditions of vulnerability. Moving back toward lack rather than on toward the grasping privilege of art suggests suspension of dominant goal-setting, that the world-sense of our collective somas might rest and resist their forward drive to envision the present more clearly. We could stumble. Then when recovering our bearings, might we remember the suffering of nature—including our human natures—internally sensed and entwined with everything on earth? With a relaxed gaze, might we welcome a future of care for a multiethnic and more-than-human world? Can we respect cultural and gender differences and work together for common causes? Dancing together shows respect. It may seem like a small thing, but I don't think so.

Somatic projects in dance, leadership, and psychology step into such open potentiality, where everything is not already written or known. Somatic

perspectives offer opportunities to cultivate interactive ethics of care, admitting existential trust and not-knowing. Trust as a possibility does not ensue from answers but grows from lived curiosities of mind and alertness, a perspective of potentiality this essay hopes to enable. Martin Heidegger (1962, p. 62-63) puts it this way: "Higher than actuality stands possibility". When we dance, we balance on the brink of possibility. At their best, all of the arts afford this. What matters is how we give ourselves to the dance of care. Apathy will not take us forward. We must dance bravely, speak our truth and listen to that of others.

## **Practice**

The following sections include somatic performances for readers to explore. They are influenced by metamorphic butoh explorations—inviting chance and change through trust. Take a few backward steps to warm up for the performances. Take time to reflect on your experiences, and keep a journal. By all means, check in with others in the performances. Listen, speak, and witness as three sides of effective communication where no one voice controls the outcome. Performance practices to explore are indicated in italics that appear throughout.

### ***Gliding with butoh: steady as you go***

*There is nothing like a butoh walk to create a floating adaptable steadiness.*

*Bend your knees slightly and glide your feet slowly across the floor*

*With the feet never lifting, just scooting smoothly along, forward, then backward,*

*Backward for a while, back in time, then forward without a plan.*

*Balance an imaginary plate of water on your head.*

*Voilà, you are there—in this meditative, uninflected butoh walk.*

*Keep going.*

I was fortunate to come across Selwa Said's effective communication and relationship-building workshops informed by Carl Rogers' client-centered psychology. She taught listening and speaking as communication skills<sup>6</sup>. I have amended her process to include walking sideways and added *witnessing* as a somatic process. The following somatic investigations influenced by her work will require a partner willing to talk to you for a short while about a topic of interest or concern to them. Eventually, you switch roles. Remember throughout these practices that listening can be a somatic practice and conscious act of creativity—teaching balance, steadiness, and adaptability.

### ***Conscious Listening***

*Partners walk slowly sideways, facing each other.*

*Find a cross pattern with your feet, one foot moving to the side, the other crossing over or behind as you go. Any comfortable pattern will do.*

*If sideways walking is too troublesome, walk forward to your partner's side, strolling together. Find a relaxed pace; you don't need to match steps.*

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<sup>6</sup> See my article on Said's work and its implications for somatics: FRALEIGH, 2012, p. 14–17.

*Stop and start as you wish.  
 Remain steady and easy in your pace, and listen while your partner speaks for a while, as long as it takes for the narrative or story to unfold and finish.  
 I know it is odd  
 and counterintuitive to talk while walking sideways,  
 But give it a try and trust. Resolve not to interrupt the speaker.  
 And when your partner stops speaking,  
 sit together in silence for a while.*

Wait until the speaker finishes, no matter how long the story takes. Can you avoid large expressive reactions to the story and the speaker? Can you be present and alive to the words without guiding them with your body language? Eyes that see and a receptive manner of listening are enough. Don't take away the speaker's power. Give space and time to your partner and aliveness to the moment of meaning. This is enough. Remember, you are not listening to teach or control. Your listening is enabling the speech of another. This is responsive, conscious listening. It is superconscious listening if you manage to keep it alive in the novelty of communication while stepping sideways and looking to the front. Alternatively, walk beside your partner and look toward them to the side. Can you remain curious throughout?

### ***The listener picks a thread***

*To interact with your partner's story,  
 Pick a story thread that interests you  
 and ask the speaker if they want to say more about it.  
 They usually do, and your interest carries their story further.*

Asking probing personal questions is not helpful. They can be hurtful. Questions are not always beneficial, especially concerning painful issues like chronic illness or divorce. Let the original words of the speaker guide your questions. Ask them if they want to say more on a topic they introduce. This keeps their story alive, helps them see more, or presents this possibility. Your listening empowers them. *Effective listening* does not steal the story with, "something like that happened to me". Remember, listening is about the speaker's story, not yours.

### ***Speaking***

*Now is the time to switch the roles of speaker and listener.  
 (Are you mixed up yet? I hope so). Take the time to walk sideways and speak of anything you wish. Let us call this "your story" for now. Relax into the present moment of your story. Let it come to you as it will. Take your time. Let it be enough. Then sit down to speak of your experience of walking sideways and talking without interruptions.*

Together, witness the process as a whole. What do you glean from this communication exploration? Did you let go of any usual manners of communication? Did you laugh at any point? Did you giggle or cry? In the role of listener, were you

able to maintain easy, steady attention throughout? How does being listened to without interruption and reaction affect your speaking and your story? As the speaker, do you feel lost without the support of a reaction in body language? Can you tell your account in the face of neutrality? When does neutrality become dull and die? What creates a lively responsiveness that doesn't take over the story?

***Let this go now***

*Walking slowly together, take several steps backward.*

*Look back when you need to.*

*Do you feel the room or outside environment around you?*

*Do you sense your surroundings as you move back further?*

*Does it bring you a new sense of aliveness?*

*These steps might bring out your resistance to your circumstances or your affordance of an original experience.*

*It all depends.*

*Thank your partner.*

*Brush your body swiftly with your hands*

*In gestures of letting go.*

**Dancing Back: Conscious Witnessing**

*Conscious listening and speaking* (conscious communication) can be called upon when one feels a block in conversation or understanding. Conscious communication is a somatic process that therapists, teachers, and leaders can utilize to foster good communication with students, clients, and groups. I don't advocate adopting it tortuously; I think it is better to learn from it, adapt it to fit one's personal communication style or serve particular situations.

As a further step, *conscious witnessing* can foster a unique somatic process of notice and care. Those involved in somatic movement studies know witnessing as an Authentic Movement Process, where one partner witnesses the dance of the other and reflects the experience back, verbally or in painting. In teaching, I use *dancing back* as an alternative and immediate way of witnessing. This is a simple turnabout, as the witness dances back to the dancer. Instances of *dance back* need not be replicas. They are better as spontaneous reflections.

In dance, many things arise in the soma-psyche beyond the rational mind. I invite you to *dance and dance back* to yourself in the following practice. What if you danced as a witness to present time? Not with any particular plan, but simply to be present in the moment? You might be surprised. Dancing back as a witness generally takes a partner, but you might try the following as a solo performance.

***Solo Invitation***

*I invite you to dance backward as a warm-up.*

*But let it morph in any direction as it does.*

*Look back when you need to.*

*What if you don't give it too much thought?*

*Next, assemble some art materials;*



*crayons and paper will do, or anything you have handy.*

*Now, set these aside and start to move without a plan.  
If nothing comes to you, walk back a few steps.  
Move back when you feel moved to move,  
Let this go, and finish when you finish.*

### **Paint**

*Paint your feelings as they arise  
It is alright to have feelings,  
We can't think without feeling.  
Feelings are human markers,  
And they manifest in culture.*

### **Rip**

*Rip your painting into a few pieces  
And reassemble the pieces  
into an unplanned collage.  
Move past judgment—  
Look at your collage and see it.*

### **Take several steps back**

*From ripping and reassembling the painting,  
Step away and back. What appears to you  
now?*

### **Dance back the reassembled painting**

*Move into the immediate present  
and let your body teach you what comes next.*

## **Ease**

Communicating and dancing somatically in convergence with nature allows us to reframe expectations and become more present. In bodily-lived terms, values of ease and letting-be can relax ambition. Do the following practices outdoors if you can; try a soft surface like sand or grass. A dance studio would also do, or theater space. Your living room would also work but go outside if you can.

### **Sink**

*Risk backward stepping again.  
Then in a butoh frame of mind, sink into gravity  
as you bend your knees slightly.*

### **Next, sit down slowly**

*and land in any kind of seat.  
Be sure to move very slowly throughout this dance,  
so that you can feel your molecules in motion.*

*Go down on the grass or sand onto the front of your body  
and land like a sphinx looking out, way out.*

***Stay there for a while, just listening***

*Be in any front lying position you like.*

*Then roll onto your back and make sounds as you roll over.*

*Make a lot of sounds.*

***Rest easily on your back***

*Making sounds and twisty, rubbery faces.*

*Go ahead. No one can see you,*

*and if they did, would it matter?*

*Let go of your solid ego.*

*Rest without expectations.*

*Dissolve.*

*Curl up on your side for comfort*

*Stay there as long as you please.*

**Ecosomatic Presence: Is-ness and We-life**

What if time doesn't have a plan? Might we then be prepared to move in multiple directions? To adapt? And to listen? Would we be less inclined to control? I nominate the values of present time consciousness, not looking back with regret or forward with anxiety. Phenomenology has a path into the presence of "is-ness" (being here and now) through unity expositions of being and being body. Our body is not in space; it is of space as Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 162) asserts: "I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them".

At the root of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1989, p. 297–299) wrote of reciprocal interactions of body, consciousness, and the natural world, conceiving the body as "a point of conversion" with nature. His foundational phenomenology explained human material in its causal possibilities: "If we apprehend the body as a real thing, it is because we find it integrated into the causal nexus of material nature"<sup>7</sup> (HUSSERL, 1989, p. 167). Husserl's process of "bracketing" reduces the labels of accepted beliefs to move past biases of solidified ego. Bracketing sheds the taken-for-granted; Husserl's transcendental philosophy tends toward tabula rasa backward steps and new beginnings, like the emptiness of Zen and butoh.

As in phenomenology, butoh, and Zen, the perspective of this essay does not separate the human body from the natural world. It regards nature in light of *presence and letting be* as related principles of unity. When we dance in oneness with the earth, we are not likely to exploit the nature we are part of. Phenomenology, Zen, and butoh all demonstrate an ethos of unity that appreciate difference, each in its way. Zen Buddhism tends toward "no mind" or the peaceful

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<sup>7</sup> Husserl first penciled *Ideas* in 1912. This critical work was published posthumously in 1952 and translated into English in 1989. He died in 1938, just before World War II broke out in Poland, and as a Jew, he accomplished his final works under the censure of Nazi policies.

mind of meditation; phenomenology attempts to clear away habitual predispositions of mind, while the mind of butoh transforms in evanescence. Below is a butoh-related and somatic dance to try. Do this with a partner who will also be your guide.

*Prepare:* Put on a loose blindfold, or just close your eyes and resolve not to open them until it is time. Your guide will be beside you but not touching you. They will only assist if you are going to bump anything. You will be moving slowly in any case. The guide will simply redirect you if you are about to bump anything. This can be done outside on even ground or in a studio. The stepping can be as you like, but if you want to recall the gliding butoh step (the beginning practice), it helps to create tranquility. I conceive this performance as a moving meditation with a guide and witness. Be sure to switch roles of guide and mover when you finish.

***Take a backward step with your eyes closed***

*Go slowly back, and disappear as you go*

*Disappear in every step, dissolve in thin air*

*What do you notice?*

*Keep going. Add waiting*

*Let your breath calm*

*Move into an easy emptiness*

*Keep going until you feel like an end is reached.*

*Take off your blindfold or open your eyes, and begin to move forward*

*Keep your steps small, soft, and slow. Reappear in every step.*

*Finish when you are ready.*

*Check in with your partner/guide/witness*

*Take time to dialogue about the experience if you wish.*

Phenomenology brackets (sheds) habits of thinking and doing, setting them aside as biases of perceptual conditioning. Waiting with wobbly uncertainty, butoh dancers cast off technical dance training to become more aware of present time and place: whether winding through obstacles, crawling, crouching, twitching, or hanging the head away from a lifted elbow. Of course, there are by now many butoh styles across the globe. Butoh means "dance step" and "ancient dance," as ancient and ageless as the body. In the seemingly strange practices above, you might also find (or stumble across) your unique butoh, not necessarily for theater performance, but for your personal discoveries and dissolution of self into a larger whole.

**Step Back**

Zen Master Dōgen (1200-1253) advises a backward step: "Take the backward step and turn the light inward. Your body-mind of itself will drop off, and your original face will appear. If you want to attain just this, immediately practice just this" (TANAHASHI; LEVITT, 2013, p. 58). In my search to illuminate somatics and well-being, I veer toward Zen and heed Dōgen Zenji's advice. Seeking the inward light of a backward step, I wait in a state of not-knowing. I wait.

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