

Making nothing out of something:
emptiness, embodiment, and creative activity

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts, Victoria University

February 2016

Abstract

Making nothing out of something: emptiness, embodiment, and creative activity presents an anthology of practice, the fruition of an interdisciplinary and practice-led path of somatic and artistic research. The research engages with questions of creative activity—the making of ‘something’ out of ‘nothing,’ as well as questions of perception—the recognition of the ‘nothing’ in the ‘something’ made. This inquiry is grounded in the embodiment practices of Body-Mind Centering® (BMC) somatics, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and meditation practices, Miksang contemplative photography, and the composition of dance/film works that celebrate the poetics of everyday life. At the centre of these practices, the research engages with narratives of embryology, the ‘making’ of a human being, as a way to remember ourselves as beings in-the-making.

The creative component comprises two dance/films —*cast* (2014) and *Postcards for John Cage* (2015), and a collection of photographs bound as a visual chapter within the thesis. The analytical written component contains reflective accounts of somatic and artistic practice, as well as further philosophical and methodological discussions. The thesis, including both the creative and analytical components, constitutes a whole anthology of practice, and therefore each element is to be considered in relationship to this whole.

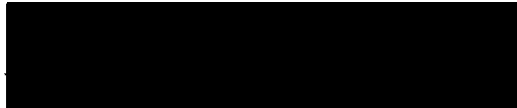
The work contributes to practices of interdisciplinarity, by suggesting and modelling methods for bringing somatic and creative research practices into conversation with philosophical discourse. The research speaks from a place of overlap and refraction in the meeting of three disciplines—Body-Mind Centering somatics, Tibetan Buddhism, and creative arts practice. From this place it suggests interdisciplinary ways of knowing, through engaging the reflective capacities made possible through contemplative arts practices and embodied awareness, as developed through somatics and dance exploration and the in-depth practice of philosophical questioning promoted by the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Student Declaration

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration (by performance/exhibition)

"I, Kimberly Sargent-Wishart, declare that the PhD exegesis entitled *Making nothing out of something: emptiness, embodiment, and creative activity* is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. This exegesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this exegesis is my own work."

Signature

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the student's signature.

Date

8/2/2016

Acknowledgements

This thesis wouldn't exist without the kind, generous and expert supervision provided by my principal supervisor Dr. Elizabeth Dempster, and associate supervisor Dr. Mark Stevenson. I thank them both for their insight, encouragement and good humour while guiding me through the labyrinth.

Thank you to Holly Cooper, Michelle Ferris, Jason Marchant, Siobhan Murphy, Phoebe Robinson, Philipa Rothfield, Suze Smith, Emma Strapps, and Kat Worth, for their willingness to dive in to the depths of somatic experience and re-surface with questions, poetry and news.

Gratitude goes to dancers Fiona Cameron and Jason Marchant, and to camera artists Elanor Webber, Cobie Orger and Roy Chu, for bringing *cast* to life.

Thanks to Jacqueline Shea Murphy and Alice Cummins, for encouraging me to go down this path in the first place, to Siobhan Murphy and Philipa Rothfield for many clarifying conversations and generous, sage advice, and to Ed Osborn for helping me out with some eleventh hour source material.

For reading and commenting on drafts of this thesis or related journal articles and book chapters, thanks to Harrison Blum, Jason Marchant, Doug MacKenzie, Rinchen Palbar, Evelyn Shapiro, Llewellyn Wishart, and an anonymous peer reviewer at the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*. For sharing reflections on the development of *cast*, I am grateful to Annalisa Birdsall, Clarinda Mac Low, Leni Mostaghim, Jessica Montgomery, Siobhan Murphy and Jarrah Wishart. Thanks to Jeremy Morrelli for fielding translation questions, and to Carmen Mensink for the generous use of her artwork.

A scholarship from the Australian Postgraduate Award enabled me to choose this path of research while raising a family, for which I am grateful. A grant from the Secomb Fund generously supported travel to present my work to peers.

As the Body-Mind Centering maxim goes, 'support precedes movement.' So to my support team at home, Llewellyn, Jarrah, and Rico Wishart, I send a huge hug of appreciation and love for your companionship, humour, and inspiration. I'm sorry you've had to see so much of the back of my head. And finally, heartfelt thanks go to Judy and Larry Sargent for the many years of support and encouragement. Thanks for having me.

Dedication

During the years that I was doing this research, I estimate that nearly 700 million people were born on this earth, and a few hundred million have passed away.

I dedicate this thesis to three extraordinary people who passed on during this time: Maria Grayson Metaxas, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, and the venerable Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, with gratitude for sharing your compassion and brilliance.

May wisdom and compassionate activity illuminate the lives of all sentient beings.

K.S.W.
February 2016



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Language Note

Tibetan and Sanskrit terms have been transliterated according to common practice in the English-language texts that I reference for this research. I have avoided using Extended Wylie Transliteration,¹ which is the standard system used within Tibetan studies, except in cases of referencing titles that include such transliterations, or in direct quotes. My intention is to make the present reading experience more easeful and fluid, and to facilitate access and further research for scholars outside of Tibetan Buddhist studies, who would likely be referencing English-language texts.

In addressing the question of how to properly cite names of Tibetan and Vietnamese authors I have opted to follow bibliographical protocol from the U.S. Library of Congress. Thus Thich Nhat Hanh is referenced as Nhat Hanh, Thich, while Thinley Norbu is referenced as Thinley Norbu. I greatly appreciate the assistance of Mark Stevenson at Victoria University and Christian Wedemeyer at the University of Chicago in thinking through my confusion and ignorance around this issue.

¹ For more information on Tibetan transcription and transliteration practices, see the Tibetan & Himalayan Library, based at the University of Virginia, online at <www.thlib.org/reference/>.

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All images and photographs by Kimberly Sargent-Wishart, except Figures 5 and 8 which were provided by Carmen Mensink.

...it is of the utmost importance not to make a thing but rather to make nothing. And how is this done? Done by making something which then goes in and reminds us of nothing. It is important that this something just be something, finitely something; then very simply it goes in and becomes infinitely nothing.

-John Cage, *Lecture on something*
(1961, p.129)

There are two endless directions
In and out.

-Agnes Martin
(Martin & Glimcher 2012, inset between pp.40/41)

Guide to thesis organization and creative works

Making nothing out of something: emptiness, embodiment, and creative activity is an anthology of research comprising writing, two dance/film works, and a collection of Miksang photography. The thesis is organized somewhat chronologically, tracing my development as a researcher and my understanding of the research territory as the project progressed and unfolded.

Chapter 1 provides a contextual review organized around the topics of emptiness, embodiment and creative activity, as defined within the particular fields of practice that I engage with, with a particular interest in the ways that these practices—Tibetan Buddhist meditation and philosophical engagement; Body-Mind Centering, dance and somatic methodologies; and art-making—already occupy a common ground and/or come into a refractive or dialogic relationship. I also flesh out my own background and positioning as a researcher. This chapter focuses on the *ground* of the research.

In Chapter 2 I describe in detail the somatic methodologies that anchor the research practice. I introduce a methodology, based in Body-Mind Centering, that is embodied, reflective, emergent, and generative of philosophical insight and artworks.

Chapters 3 and 4 delve into two distinct phases of somatic research practice. The first phase, related in Chapter 3, emerged out of my initial comparative reading of Western and Tibetan embryology. I conducted an eight-week movement research series with a group of six participant dancer/researchers, exploring the five elemental phases, which are the constitutive forces at work in developing the body according to most Tibetan embryological accounts. This phase brought the five-element system into a practice dialogue with Western anatomy, physiology, and embryology through somatic practice. This work developed into a symposium presentation, a published article (Sargent-Wishart 2012a), and a conference workshop.²

² My talk, 'Embodying the Elemental Energies,' was presented at the *Where the Image Meets the Body* symposium, Monash University, November 2011. I also presented this material in an experiential workshop at the Body-Mind Centering Association Conference at Naropa University, Boulder, in June 2013.

The second phase of research, discussed in Chapter 4, explored the foundational enactive gesture of cell division. According to Western embryology and cell biology, cell division is the basic mechanism underlying the body's development and ongoing physiology. Cell division is also the 'opening move' of embryogenesis, the first transformative movement to occur after conception. For this phase of inquiry I led three somatic research sessions with six dancer/researchers, and presented a paper at the Science and Nonduality Conference in the U.S.³

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the creative arts phases of my research, the making of the two dance/films, and Miksang photography practice. Due to the dynamic and dialogic relationship between the path of creating artworks and my own evolving understanding as a researcher and philosopher, these chapters do not constitute a strict chronological narrative of practice. Chapter 5 reflects primarily on the making of *cast*, with a focus on how the practice enlivened my understanding of the resonance between the three embryological germ layers, the three aspects of ground, path and fruition in Buddhist philosophy, and the sense of being present as an alive, embodied human being in a lively environment. To create *cast* I worked with two dancers over a period of six months, in a process that began with somatic methods in the dance studio and then brought this work into conversation with the outer, urban landscape. The embryological material, Buddhist philosophy, and the working process of making the piece all co-contributed to the simultaneous generation of the artwork, reflective insight and theory.

Chapter 6 explores artwork—my own and others'—as embodied presence. I reflect on the practice of Miksang photography and the making of *cast*, including connections between somatic and aesthetic realms of operation, certain aesthetic choices, the significance of the naming of the piece, and knowledge gleaned through the experience of crafting and editing. I consider the work of art as fruition that exists in relation to the path of practice and the ground of possibility—as the something that 'goes in and reminds us of nothing.'

³ 'Embodying Differentiation and Wholeness: Lessons from Embryology' was presented at the Science and Nonduality Conference in San Rafael, California, in October 2012. The given theme of nonduality assisted me in organizing my findings about the dynamics of cell division and its philosophical implications.

Chapter 7 articulates questions that emerged during the research process and reflects on research contributions.

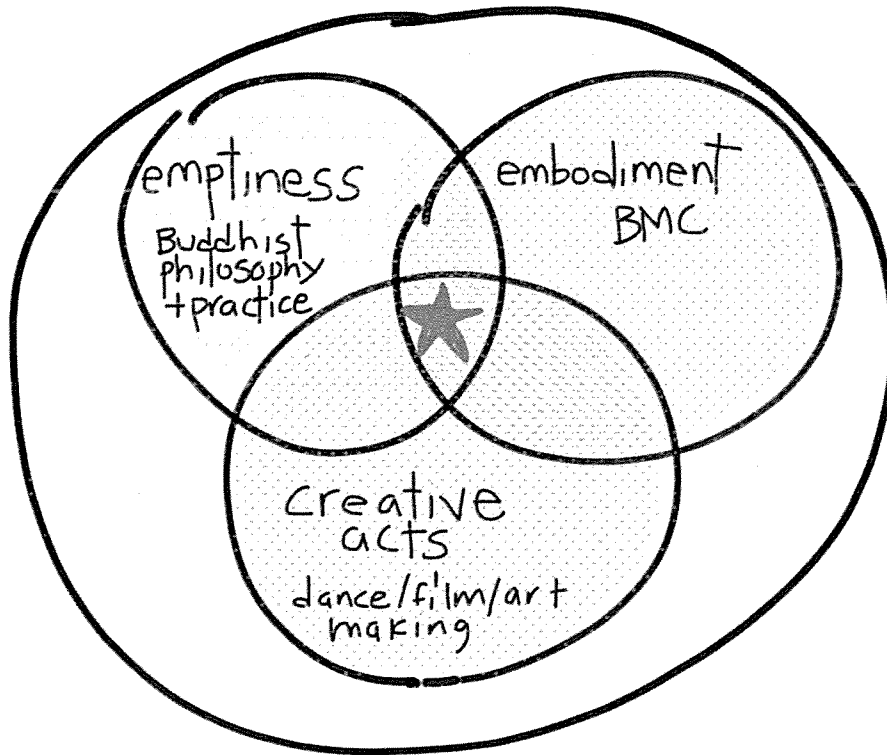
Following Chapter 7 is a collection of photographs bound as a visual chapter. The practice of Miksang contemplative photography, from which these images were produced, articulates a practice of ‘synchronizing eye and mind’ and the appreciation of the ‘ordinary magic of the phenomenal world.’⁴ Engaging in this practice greatly influenced the making of my two dance/films and my bridging of somatics and aesthetics. The photographs can be visited at any point in reading the thesis, perhaps providing a restorative release into immediate visual perception as a break from processing language.

The final film, *Postcards for John Cage* (on disc or available at <https://vimeo.com/125763415>), serves as a conclusion, and should be viewed last.

Readers are asked to view *cast* (on disc or available at <https://vimeo.com/99390332>) before proceeding with the written thesis.

⁴ Quotes are taken from the workshop description. Retrieved 15 May 2015 from <<http://melbourne.shambhala.info/program-details/?id=138194>>.

Chapter 1. Contextual review: mapping the territory of emptiness, embodiment, and creative activity



The diagram reproduced above is a schematic I created for my doctoral research proposal in 2010, taking my first steps on this research path. The three circles in the image represent the three terms in my thesis title: emptiness, embodiment, and creative acts. Before I arrived at any specific research questions, I knew what the ground or territory of the research would be. In a practical, tangible sense this ground, or territory, has determined the path and the outcomes. The research territory—my crucible of inquiry—is marked by the star on the diagram, in the overlap of three intersecting spheres. The spheres represent academically distinct fields of study, discourse, and practice. These three fields also share the premise that perspectives and identities shift based on view, experience and development. In this way, the overlapping of disciplines is truthful to these particular traditions of inquiry, as well as based in my own experience as an interdisciplinary artist, meditator, and researcher. For me, movement (and, by extension, working with the moving image through choreography and film) has always been a path of research, of knowing, and of

philosophical reflection on the nature of being, knowledge, and embodied experience. In entering the point of conversation between these three disciplines, I carried the belief that practice and theoretical reflection on and through that practice go hand-in-hand; that artistic practice and production, somatic exploration, and various modes of writing can all contribute to a developing knowledge, and that this knowledge is both borne by and challenged by experiential engagement. This is the essential meaning of philosophy, literally ‘love of wisdom,’ as penetrating inquiry into the nature of reality that has scaffolded the reflective process of my research.

When I began, this is what I knew: that there was fertile ground in the meeting place of these three disciplines. My research questions have arisen through remaining in the place of inquiry, in the sweet spot on this Venn diagram of overlapping circles, and I have done my best to pay attention to the constantly shifting terrain. This has meant allowing my perception and understandings of the parameters of the territory to change as my knowledge and questions have evolved.

Note that in the diagram, there is a larger circle containing the three smaller overlapping circles. This is significant symbolically in that it illustrates the intrinsic wholeness of the terrain (of any terrain), the aspect of reality that is not and cannot be divided into such distinct realms. This larger circle shows the implicit wholeness of the situation. It also has served to help me define and contain the scope of my research when the many tangential pathways beckoned. The development of this simple schematic is an illustration of practice-led research, of letting the material lead the inquiry: my initial diagram was of the three inside circles only, but it just didn't sit right with me when I looked at it. It didn't *feel* right. So I added the larger container. It was only after making this decision at the material level—responding perhaps aesthetically, perhaps conceptually, definitely from my ‘gut’—that I understood why it was important and what it represented.

The divisions that the three inner circles embody are cultural, historical, academic, habitual, and sometimes convenient. And they have been instructive. Though first chosen and established based on my own personal and professional history, soon this schematic began to reflect for me deeper aspects of the research material itself. The circles reflect, for instance, the logical structure of ground, path and fruition within

Buddhist thought (i.e. emptiness as ground, creative acts as path, and embodiment as fruition), which, as it turns out, became a central organizing theme of my research efforts.

This chapter provides a contextual review—a way of ‘mapping the terrain’ of my research (Gray & Malins 2004). I provide a background introduction to the main traditions of practice that I draw on (namely Tibetan Buddhism, Body-Mind Centering, and postmodern/pedestrian and contemplative movements in dance and art) and note some key instances of researchers and artists working in similar overlapping configurations. In the process of mapping, I also discuss and offer definitions for several key terms as they are intended within these specific disciplines. As the central ground of the project is in the overlap, diffraction, and conversation (and indeed the indivisibility) among the three mapped disciplines, this discussion of the terrain will further unfold throughout the thesis as a whole. Threaded into this contextual review is my own practice history and influences, my perspective as a researcher, and my beliefs and goals for the research project.

Emptiness

From the beginning, emptiness and phenomena are inseparable. This is the general Buddhist point of view. Wherever there is emptiness, there are phenomena, and wherever there are phenomena, there is emptiness (Thinley Norbu 1999, p.30).

Emptiness is not a *state* but a *way*. Not only is it inseparable from the world of contingencies, it too is ‘contingently configured.’ To experience emptiness is not a descent into an abyss of nothingness nor an ascent into a separate realm. It is recovery of the freedom to configure oneself as an intentional, unimpeded trajectory through the shifting, ambiguous sands of life (Batchelor 2000, p.21).

Whatever is, in relation to all that is, is always in the midst of or on the way to becoming something else, hence empty of inherent existence. The realization of emptiness, then, not only heightens an awareness of what is, but also emphasizes that whatever is, is radically open (Cooley 1990, p.14).

Through its doctrine of emptiness, Buddhism affirms the primacy of the potential space in which the creative act occurs’ (Epstein 2004, p.35).

Emptiness is the most common translation of the Sanskrit term *sunyata*, and represents a fundamental teaching, if not *the* key teaching, in the Mahayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. As argued by Nagarjuna, the great second century Indian monk and philosopher, *sunyata* refers to the view that no phenomena can ever be found to be permanent or independently existing. This view, and the school of Buddhism

following on from Nagarjuna, is known as the ‘middle way’ (*Madhyamaka*), for rejecting the two extreme views of nihilism on the one hand (claiming phenomena do not exist), and eternalism on the other (claiming phenomena exist independently and permanently). According to Nagarjuna’s middle way doctrine, ‘all phenomena are empty of essence, but exist conventionally, interdependently, and impermanently’ (Garfield 2009, p.26), and therefore anything that exists is defined by ephemerality, flux, possibility, relationship, ambiguity, and interdependence—conditioned by every action, material, and concept that contributes to its appearance. This assessment includes any and all phenomena perceived through our sense faculties (form, colour, taste, etc.), as well as ideas, emotions, even consciousness itself and the very identity of the self who perceives.

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh describes this view of existence as *interbeing*, as illustrated by the following commentary:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. We can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are....

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. So we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also, so we can say that everything is in here in this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. To be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is (Nhat Hanh 2012, p.413).

Though the word emptiness may sound nihilistic, *sunyata*, by shifting attention to the dynamics of interdependence and interbeing, indicates an openness, a positive field of unlimited creative potential in which anything can arise. Thus it indicates a fullness, rather than a lack.

In opening up access to the third space of intermediate experience, Buddhism asserts that there is something positive, something joyful, something creative that underlies all experience. While the self, or the object, may not be the concrete, self-sufficient entity that we imagined, the alternative is not nothingness. Emptiness is best compared to the hollow of a pregnant

womb; *shunyata* is derived from the Sanskrit word *shvi*, which means swelling, like the swelling of a seed as it expands. There is a fullness to Buddhist emptiness, a sense of spaciousness that both holds and suffuses the stuff of the world (Epstein 2004, p.34).

Emptiness, as Steven Batchelor (2000, p.21) puts it, is a *way*. It is a soteriological strategy, a practice, for interrupting habitual reification of form. In other words, by pointing to the impermanence of the figure, this strategy leads to the foregrounding of the ground, which is, so to speak, where the action is. In fact, the empty ground can be seen as making any action possible. As Traleg Kyabgon states, ‘without emptiness nothing could exist.’ Emptiness, he clarifies, does not ‘[cause] things to come into being, but rather it allows them to come into being, just as space allows for things to be’ (Kyabgon 2001, p.76). Form relies on emptiness, and emptiness relies on form; they are inseparable.

In the same vein, experimental composer John Cage (1961, p.129) declared that ‘nothing and something need each other to keep on going,’ alluding to the *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*’s famous refrain: ‘form is emptiness, and emptiness is form, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form.’⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh’s commentary on this sutra includes the metaphor of the wave in relation to the ocean. He teaches that, “‘form is emptiness, emptiness is form’ is like wave is water, water is wave’ (Nhat Hanh 1988, p.15). Even though we can identify, and maybe even surf, a particular wave, when we examine closely it is impossible to say precisely ‘this is wave, this is not wave,’ or to determine which bit of water is the wave and which bit is not. The metaphor illustrates how the identity of the wave is marked by impermanence and relativity (form is emptiness), but, equally important, water does arise and exist as wave (emptiness is form). This view puts questions of life and death, creation and destruction, into a wider context of a background ‘sea,’ out of which and as which everything arises. Just as the wave emerges out of and resolves back into water, while also never being anything other than water, there is a basic background potential that is the essence of all experience.

Many Buddhist meditative practices, then, are designed to bring the practitioner’s

⁵ The *Heart Sutra* is noted as being the most famous and central Buddhist scripture in the Mahayana tradition. It is presently recited daily in many Buddhist centres of all persuasions around the world. The date of its composition has been estimated to be anywhere from 100 c.e. to 600 c.e. For complete translations of the Heart Sutra with commentary, see Lopez 1988; Nhat Hanh 1988; 2012.

attention to the arising and subsiding of phenomena such as thoughts and feelings, or the breath. In Shambhala Warrior training, which I undertook as a practitioner in the 1990s, I was instructed to notice the arising of thoughts without pushing them away or clinging to their content. The instruction is to be diligent but relaxed: 'not too tight, not too loose.' In allowing thoughts to just be, their content becomes less of a main event, and more of a display. Sitting meditation practices such as this one train the mind in developing awareness of the basic ground, or space, out of which and as which thoughts, and all phenomena, arise. In contrast to the impermanent and conditioned appearance of objects (including thoughts as objects of consciousness), the ground of emptiness, sunyata, is immeasurable, unconditioned, and undifferentiated, not marked by arising or subsiding, holding the potential for everything, and nothing. And yet, all the same, objects are none other than the ground, and the ground is none other than the objects that arise.

Certain practices of dance improvisation also train awareness to the ground from which and as which all possible movements arise, and in my experience the practices of sitting meditation and dance improvisation are closely related and mutually supportive. As an example, many years ago I studied dance improvisation with David Appel, who taught me a technique of 'listening' for movement impulse in the spaces of the joints. The technique begins with attending to one joint, but with practice one can listen and respond to impulses from several joints in rapid succession, creating some very surprising and fresh dancing. When I improvise, I open up a space, a crack in the familiar routine, in which something unpredictable might emerge. 'The improvising dancer tacks back and forth between the known and the unknown' (Foster 2003, p.4), in a practice that requires (and reinforces) trust in the undifferentiated ground of potential. Attending to the space can also lead the dancer to stillness, a state often feared by the novice improviser who may feel a need to fill the space with activity, a need to *do* something. As accomplished jazz musicians demonstrate, mastery of improvisation often lies in listening to the silence. Through practicing paying attention to the groundless, formless unknown, surprising and refreshing things can arise. Choreographer, composer and Buddhist practitioner Meredith Monk asserts that 'one of the things that artists do is to tolerate hanging out in the unknown. That is a process most people don't want to undertake. It's trying to deal with things that are unnameable, trying to be very present' (panellist in Marranca 2002, p.23).

Like sitting meditation, dance improvisation builds capacity for and familiarity with the practice of letting go of a certain kind of control and identity, which in turn supports the vigour and openness required for artistic practice and research.

In the Dharma Arts practice of the Shambhala Buddhist lineage (following the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa), the ground or space of potential is sometimes referred to as the heaven principle, and is the starting point for this style of contemplative arts practice.⁶ Trungpa relates the heaven principle to the experience of sitting at a blank canvas and not knowing what to paint, and the fear that can arise from the not knowing:

That first space is heaven, and it is the best one...it is just basic space in which you have no idea what *it* is going to do or what *you* are going to do about it or put into it. This initial fear of inadequacy may be regarded as heaven, basic space, complete space. Such fear of knowledge is not all that big a fear, but a gap in space that allows you to step back. It is one's first insight, a kind of positive bewilderment (Trungpa 2008, 154-155, italics original).

Heaven, in Trungpa's terminology, is a space of freedom, possessing qualities of 'wakefulness,' 'delight,' and 'brilliance' (Trungpa 2008, p.129). Video artist Bill Viola refers to this in terms of time, rather than space (or perhaps the space of time):

This is the state of confusion, unclarity, nonunderstanding that precedes all creative breakthroughs. It is the time of an unfinished thought, the time that the painter must go through (not the painting itself), the time behind the facade of all great discoveries. The still turbulence of being up at three-thirty in the morning. It is the time of risk, the point of unification between art, science, and all the creative activities (Viola 1995, p.173).

In 2013 I attended a Level 1 Miksang Photography workshop in Melbourne. Developed within the Shambhala lineage, Miksang (meaning 'good eye' in Tibetan) photography is a training in perception, organized according to the three levels of perception as proposed by Trungpa: 1, perceiving things just as they appear to be; 2, perceiving things as emptiness and space; and 3, perceiving luminosity, which entails 'a sense of sharp boundary or clarity' that is immediate and 'unmistakable' (Trungpa 2008, pp.105-106). The Level 1 Miksang assignments are designed to cut through habits of seeing, to interrupt one's usual interpretive overlay, to begin to notice immediate qualities such as texture and colour as they appear, rather than identifying a certain thing that is textured or colourful. On the first day of the workshop, I found my eye/mind/camera/attention was easily drawn to colour, texture, and pattern.

⁶ Chögyam Trungpa uses the terms heaven, earth and human, from the Japanese tradition of Ikebana, flower arranging, to describe the Dharma Arts practice approach of infusing the artist's state of mind into an artwork. See Trungpa 2008, especially pp.129-132.

Following the assigned practice, I allowed those qualities to lead my attention, cultivating the Miksang principle of ‘synchronizing mind, eye and camera’ in the present moment to capture what is perceived as accurately as possible (see Figure 1).

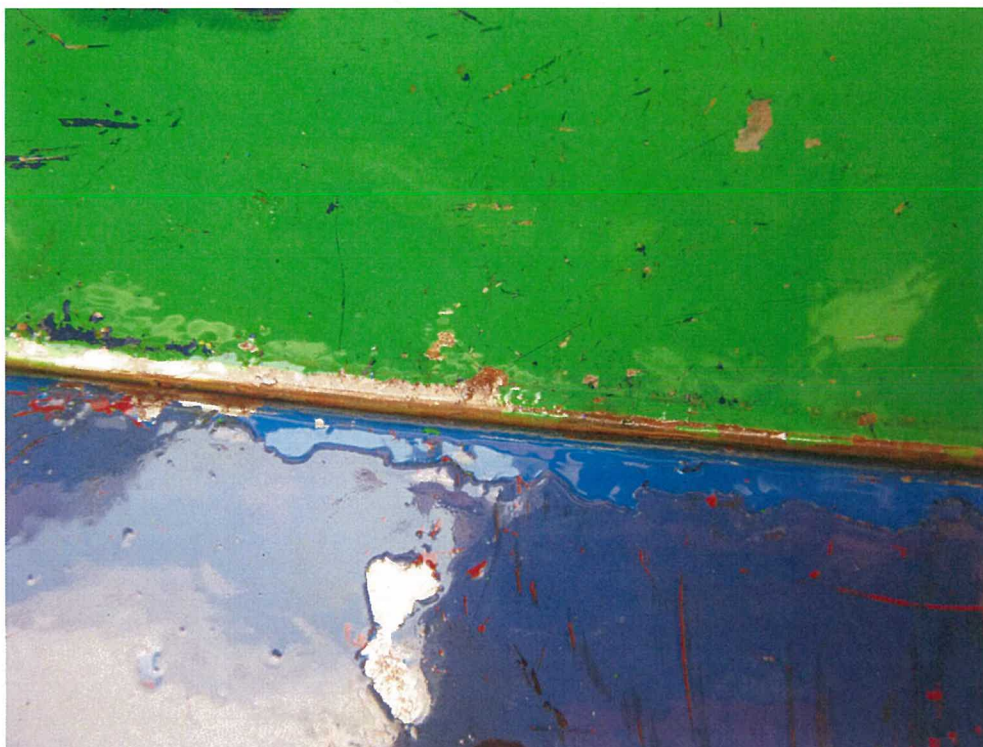


Figure 1 - Seeing colour

On the second day of the training, we were given the assignment to photograph space. Suddenly things became much more challenging! The course instructor, Chuckie Brookes, told us that a good space photograph doesn't give the eye any place to land. I realized in that afternoon that my eye likes having a place to land, that I enjoy composing the frame with line, form, and colour, relying reflexively on my many years of studying choreography and composition. To photograph space, I had to let all of this go (see Figure 2). Letting go of knowledge, according to Miksang senior instructor Julie DuBose, is a necessary step to wisdom:

This is a process of letting go; letting go of what we think we know, letting go of all our conventional ideas and concepts that we have always relied upon. Letting go, letting go, letting go, so that we can experience the wisdom that is inherent in our minds, that is awake, inquisitive, and dynamically engaged in the experience of living our lives. The only way to access this wisdom is to let go. There is no other way (DuBose 2013, p.11).

I still practice this particular assignment of photographing (and filming) space, as I

find it brings a freshness to my seeing by forcing me to let go of my habitual compositional control. I feel it is one way toward perceiving things as emptiness.



Figure 2 - Early attempts at photographing space

Just after the Miksang photography workshop I enrolled in an online poetry course with Mark Olmsted. Olmsted is a senior student in the *Nyingma* lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and an accomplished Beat poet. Olmsted infuses his poetry instruction with Buddhist teachings, as did Beat writers like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Diane di Prima. Much of the coursework involved sitting in parks and cafes and practicing writing what we perceived as accurately as possible. Like Miksang, the aim of this practice is to cut through habitual conceptualizing mind to the freshness, the ‘first thought’ that arises as a flash in the groundlessness of perception. This is the poem I wrote in week 7 of the course, when the focus was on revising the poem to more accurately reflect our original flash of experience:

The Purple Box

Riding through the cemetery
I eye the magpie, wary –
her claws are sharp, my helmet shiny.
I ride faster, aim for invisibility.

The purple box catches my eye.

On its side, beside a grave all churned-up dirt, yellow ribbon –
an expensive gift for a ghost
clearly missed, decomposing, now my treasure,
for a picture. Although digital, it will likely last longer.

Riding through the laneway behind school
caught by a white façade,
for a short moment I understand space.

When I look back it's gone.

Embodiment and Body-Mind Centering⁷

To stop your mind does not mean to stop the activities of mind. It means your mind pervades your whole body (Suzuki 1995, p.41).

Student: For me, Rinpoche, the body is just very slow mind.
Kundun Gyalwang Drukpa (*a little testily*): Of course (Henderson 1997, p.216).⁸

I have found that my body is, in a sense, a microcosm of the world, and thus a laboratory for understanding its meaning (Stinson 2004, p.160).

The dynamic and poetic view of phenomena that was taught by the Buddha and his followers has exciting implications, I feel, for how we define and experience the life of our bodies, and has resonance with several practices within the field of somatics and dance. In the movement-based embodied anatomy practices of Body-Mind Centering (BMC) that comprises much of my methodology, we aerate the body, we embody our fluid nature, the spaces in between recognized structures, the breath within the cells, the dynamics of the subcellular organelles; in essence, our *poiesis*—the ongoing cell birth, differentiation and death that is our living breathing body in action. We also embody our structure and cell membrane, those elements that give us clear form and shape, that create the wave, this singularity, this process we call body. At the depths of cellular awareness we find that our bodies are not solid, we are not permanent, we are in perpetual motion, and yet we continually manifest form. As awareness shifts, the body changes, and so do our perceptions.

The weight of my bones, organs, muscles, and joints endlessly spreads out into the floor.
There are 206 bones in the human body, 26 in each foot. Joints break open. Tongue dissolves, Throat disappears. I abandon holding onto the shape of me. I am movement without looking for it. Only a sketch remains on the floor (Hay 2000, p.2, italics original).

⁷ Body-Mind Centering® is a registered service mark, and BMC™ is a service mark, owned by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. I am a certified practitioner of BMC, having completed a 1000-hour program of study, 1995-1999 in Berkeley, California.

⁸ Rinpoche is a Tibetan honorific term meaning 'precious one.'

Embodiment is a word with many meanings. Like the notion of emptiness, embodiment denotes a practice of perception, or a way of being in the world and with the world, or a simple assessment of the way things are, beyond conceptualization. Since my use of the term embodiment is mainly derived from the discipline of Body-Mind Centering (BMC), which draws on the wider field of somatics, I will begin with exploring the term as it is generally used in somatic practices. Somatics, a term coined by Thomas Hanna in the late 1970s, represents an approach that names and values the *soma* as the lived, experienced body. Embodiment, in somatic approaches, can be thought of as a practice of attuning to the soma, as well as a more integrated state of being that can arise through these practices. Hanna emphasised ‘the soma’s alive and changing status, replete with cellular intelligence and a capability of perceiving itself’ (Hanna in Eddy 2002, p.47) which defines living human beings. According to BMC teacher Rebecca Haseltine:

Somatic experience, somatic awareness, somatic intelligence, and somatic ‘thinking’ are all part of BMC. ‘Somatic’ refers to the body, but it contains a view of the body that is distinct from the typical Western view. The body is not an object, but a happening. The body is an unfolding being that is conscious. The body is not an ‘it’ (Haseltine 2012, p.5).

Since Hanna's introduction of the word somatics, it has become an umbrella term for a wide field of education and practice concerned with embodiment. Martha Eddy (2009, p.6) likens it to ‘a field of wildflowers with unique species randomly popping up across wide expanses,’ musing, ‘How did individual experiences of, and with, the living body become a field?’ Nevertheless, this field now includes many schools of somatic education, psychology, bodywork and movement, as well as an international organisation (ISMETA) of somatic practitioners and teachers, and a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to academic writings on somatics and dance.⁹ Somatic practices share a general intention to support individuals to ‘learn newly, become pain free, move more easily, do our life work more efficiently, and perform with greater vitality and expressiveness’ (Eddy 2009, p.2). The terms suggested by Haseltine—somatic experience, somatic awareness, somatic intelligence, and somatic thinking—are becoming more widely used (along with phrases such as ‘embodied ways of knowing’) to describe the particular kind of knowing that arises out of paying

⁹ The *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* is published by Intellect Books, since 2009. Additionally, The Novato Institute for Somatic Research and Training produces *Somatics*, a print ‘magazine-journal,’ founded by Hanna in 1976. Information on ISMETA—the International Somatic Movement Education & Therapy Association—can be found at <www.ismeta.org>.

attention to the lived body-mind experience that Hanna called the soma.¹⁰ Several postgraduate researchers have explored BMC's connections to performance (Cummins 2008), directing (Izzard 2013), and shamanism (Adamek 2007). In describing my own approach I would also add 'somatic philosophy' to Haseltine's list, to designate a specific activity of digesting and manifesting philosophical propositions (theory) through somatic movement research (practice). This kind of inquiry cultivates and relies on what Don Hanlon Johnson describes as 'a sane mind in a savvy body':

'Corpus sapiens,' the 'savvy body,' refers to the wisdom in the experience of one's hormonal messages, of muscular tensions and releases, of quivers in the intestines, of a sharp pain in the elbow, and of a rush of relief in breath... 'Sana,' in this view, refers to the sanity that comes from an intelligence situated within the pulsing fluids of experience in immediate sensory contact with the natural world (Johnson 1994, p.34).

Access to the wisdom of this 'savvy body' is cultivated through many hours of practice, engaging in experiential anatomy and movement development in the studio. Through somatic practices, the body-mind can become an intelligent site of—and way of—engaging with, of *dancing* with, philosophical questions.

Richard Shusterman has coined the term *somaesthetics* to encourage a return to the body's wisdom in philosophical discourse—defining it as 'the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning' (Shusterman 1999, p.302). Shusterman draws here on the early Greek term *aisthesis*, which indicates the realm of sensory perception, and forms the root of the term *aesthetics* as coined by Baumgarten to indicate the 'science of cognitive sensation' (Baumgarten in Shusterman 1999, p.302). Noting that Baumgarten omitted sensory appreciation and the cultivation of the sensing body in his formulation of aesthetics, Shusterman adds the prefix *soma*, citing the 'beautiful experience of one's own body from within,' or 'proprioceptive beauty' (Shusterman 1999, p.299) as aesthetic experience. Shusterman's proposal is, in some senses, a return to early Greek philosophy, before the body went out of philosophical favour, and it also draws on Asian practices such as yoga and martial arts, as well as more contemporary somatic practices, which believe that 'knowledge of the world is improved not by denying our bodily senses but by perfecting them' (Shusterman 1999, p.302). Cultivating our proprioceptive

¹⁰ See for example Barbour 2011.

skills creates further pathways to knowledge. The insistence on engaging physically and sensually with the world in order to be present with it and know it recalls the Buddhist meditation and art practices described above. Buddhism and somatics in many ways are in the same camp.

Martha Eddy, tracing the genealogy of somatics in Europe and the Americas, notes common themes in the somatics literature: 'an emphasis on a whole-system perspective: ecology, feminism, spirituality, cultural pluralism, nonviolent change, decentralization of decision-making, and a shift from outside authority to self-responsibility' (Eddy 2002, p.47). Although considered to be a largely European and American field, Eddy argues that the development of somatic practices, and of a postmodern somatic paradigm, owes a great deal to Eastern and African influences on its founders. Eddy particularly notes the influence of Asian mind-body practices, such as aikido and yoga, on Bainbridge Cohen's development of BMC. Eddy and Shusterman, along with other writers on somatics and embodied ways of knowing, point to the alignment of somatics practices with Eastern traditions of cultivation of mind-body integration.

Other somatics proponents speak from the perspective of accomplished dancers, who argue for bringing the 'savvy body' to all areas of research and education in a robust interdisciplinary inquiry, while simultaneously quite visibly employing and engaging the savvy body in their writing. Notably this list includes Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2011), who continually brings the experience of the 'tactile-kinaesthetic body' into the centre (from out of the margins) of phenomenology; Sue Stinson (1995; 2004), who writes of the challenges and benefits of integrating the body's wisdom into scholarly writing; Jill Green (2002) and Gill Wright Miller (2011), who present somatics practice as a postpositivist, postmodern, feminist paradigm, supportive of dance education but also of great value in all disciplines; and Leena Rouhiainen, who sees somatic practice as invaluable in developing 'ethically embodied' students, concluding that 'the inclusion of somatic activities in curriculum in different fields can enhance students' self-understanding and their capacity to form ethical relationships with others' (Rouhiainen 2008, abstract). The legacy of somatics, then, is a reaffirmation of the mind-body experience as a path of knowing, of being present in relationship with the world and other people.

This range of practices employed by somatic approaches has also been called ‘embodiment.’ As with practices of meditation, practices of embodiment require time, attention, and proper training. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, the founder of BMC, gives us a further definition of embodiment as a state, which she defines as ‘automatic presence, clarity, and knowing, without having to search for it or pay attention’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.157). This is embodiment as an experience, arrived at, perhaps only fleetingly, as the fruition of the path of practice, while it is also still the practice itself. In this usage the term extends beyond a more common designation of any state of inhabiting a body, to name a particular, desirable state of cultivated integration. Embodiment within the BMC context, for Haseltine, *is* the practice, ‘a practice of exploration, discovery, sensing, feeling, moving, stillness, awareness, forgetting and being. Embodiment itself is elusive,’ as likely to appear during ‘a moment of recognition’ as during ‘unconsciousness and forgetting’ (Haseltine 2012, p.7). There is no specific recipe. Embodiment, when realised, ‘is a direct experience; there are no intermediary steps or translations’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.157).

Although there is no specific recipe to ‘get to’ embodiment, Bainbridge Cohen, along with teachers and students in the School for Body-Mind Centering, have developed diverse specific methods over the forty years of the school’s existence. The process, like many highly experiential forms of study, is difficult to codify, but there is a clear methodology involved, from which variations inevitably arise in response to any given situation. BMC is, in essence, developmental and relational. It is developmental in that students begin where they are in the development of their understanding – cognitive, emotional, physical, kinaesthetic—and it is relational, in that this development always occurs in relation to the environment, including elements of gravity, space, and other people, as well as elements of consciousness such as memories and expectations.

Embodiment as *process* is experiential, reliant on practice, and it cannot be faked or fabricated. A similar description is given for the enlightened or awake state within Buddhism. In both of these traditions, practitioners rely on maps for the journey (such as a specific, consciously guided practice) and guidance from experienced teachers (whether through verbal instruction or by direct transmission of a mind-body state)

with an aim to directly and clearly know the territory. In both traditions we are reminded not to confuse the map with the terrain; as the terrain becomes experientially known, its direct experiencing becomes primary, and the map recedes into the background until needed again. Returning to the map and, frequently, revising it based on the exploration, is part of BMC's process of reflection, integration and learning.

Susan Aposhyan describes BMC as a 'framework for perceiving change, a state of mind that allows for a spontaneous and open perception of our bodily mind,' from which 'arise ways of feeding a situation back to itself' (Aposhyan 2008, p.vii). This dynamic looping of perception and reflection, experience and naming, is an apt model, as I see it, for practice-based learning and research, making a claim for the interdependent relationship between practice and theory. 'BMC merges the conceptual and experiential, shifting between observing and embodying' (Aposhyan 2008, p.vii). Within the context of research, embodiment can be defined as grounding theory in practice, whether that practice is somatic, contemplative, artistic or otherwise. The practice and process of somatic embodiment informs itself, and in this practice the bodily territory is the subject and the object of the research—highly experiential, filtering and digesting research provocations through movement, reflection, and 'trying it on' in/as a living breathing soma.

BMC is fairly unique in the field of somatics (along with a few others, such as the Feldenkrais method) in its emphasis on anatomical and physiological specificity. In other words, the map it relies on is a highly detailed atlas of the human body that is based on contemporary Western science. But without the activity of mind, it remains at the level of inanimate map. BMC practitioners 'assume that whatever exists within us as a structure or a function can be embodied and directly experienced' (Haseltine 2012, p.5). This is largely due to the method's emphasis on the process of 'mind' as expressed through and as the body, and as the whole person. BMC defines and locates mind as an intelligent awareness that exists at every level of our being. In the practice jargon of BMC, cells have mind, particular tissues or body systems have mind, and when we focus our embodiment in specific systems, fluids, tissues or movement patterns, we express different aspects of mind. For example, the mind and movement quality present in embodying the lymph is direct and focused, whereas in synovial

fluid (the fluid in the joint space) there is more of an indirect, aimless, and playful quality. ‘When we talk about a nerve or muscle, for example, we are not just talking about a substance but also about a state of consciousness’ (McGuire 2011, p.372) animating that substance. In a studio full of people engaged in exploring the same body system, there is also what is called the ‘mind of the room,’ a palpable change in tone in the space itself, which further supports the exploration. By locating mind within and throughout bodily experience, the intelligence of the cellular ground is highlighted as the basis of our bodily knowing, or somatic intelligence. Somatic learning and research involves dynamic interaction between information that flows ‘from the top down’ (from the cerebral cortex to all cells, including those of the brain) and information that flows ‘from the bottom up’ (from all cells to the brain), recognizing that consciousness, and intelligence, exists at all of these levels.

The hyphen in Body-Mind Centering is not a linking up of dualities, as the old stubborn Cartesian binary of mind and body might lead us to expect, but rather represents the process of bonded relationship between what we call mind and what we call body: upon close examination and through somatic experience we find they are inextricably linked and continually responsive to each other. John Dewey was likely the first to propose the term *body-mind* (along with *mind-body*) in a 1927 lecture, noting then that there was no one term for the experience of the soma in the English language, no expression of ‘a unified wholeness of operation’ (Dewey 1928, p.6).¹¹ Recognizing the soma as an operative unity of action, as Dewey suggested, allows us to shift the mind-body question from one of classification into one of practice, into asking how we might develop our capacity (for beneficial activity, compassionate presence, physical and artistic skills, for example). As has been mentioned previously, this non-dualistic approach, and focus on cultivation, has had more traction in Eastern philosophical discourse. Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa (1987, p.18) provides a pan-cultural perspective on the issue:

One of the characteristics of Eastern body-mind theories is the priority given to the questions, ‘How does the relationship between the mind and the body come to be (through cultivation)?’ or ‘What does it become?’ The traditional issue in Western philosophy, on the other hand is, ‘What is the relationship between the mind-body?’ In other words, in the East one starts from the experiential assumption that the mind-body modality changes through the training of the mind and body by means of cultivation (*shugyo*) or training (*keiko*). Only after assuming this

¹¹ It should be noted that Dewey developed much of his mind-body philosophy through somatics practice with F.M. Alexander. See Shusterman 2008 for an explication of Alexander’s theories and techniques, including the value of ‘somatic reflection,’ and their influence on Dewey’s thinking.

experiential ground does one ask what the mind-body relation is. That is, the mind-body issue is not simply a theoretical speculation but it is originally a practical, lived experience (*taiken*), involving the mustering of one's whole mind and body. The theoretical is only a reflection of this lived experience.

The third term, *taiken*, meaning to go through something experientially, corporeally, is particularly descriptive of embodied research. Mental and physical experiences are inseparable, as we gain knowledge and wisdom by moving through, and with, the world. Proponents of embodied mind and embodied cognition such as Antonio Damasio, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch and Alva Noë, along with the dancer/philosopher/scholars mentioned above, have done great work in helping to further the cause of undoing decades of dualistic misconception about the nature of the mind and body. Their work, in tandem with somatics practitioners, is finally giving voice to the experience of soma that Dewey named almost one hundred years ago.



Figure 3 - Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen teaching in Boulder, Colorado, June 2013

I want to pause here to give a bit of background about Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (see Figure 3), since without her pioneering work my research would have been something entirely different, or may not exist at all. Within Bainbridge Cohen's teaching and writing there is evidence of a fine balance between scientific rigour and completely open-ended inquiry that allows and invites unanswered (and unanswerable) questions.

This openness reflects her extensive background in Zen meditation, tai chi chuan, yoga, and contemporary dance. She is comfortable with a mystery, with meeting people as they are, with not needing to fix a problem—or even to identify a problem in need of fixing. During my practitioner training Bainbridge Cohen would often do sessions with children during the lunch break, and, if the families allowed, we were invited to watch. At the beginning of one of these sessions, I heard her say to a family, ‘I don't know anything, but I believe anything is possible,’ which impressed me so that I immediately noted it in my journal. What struck me was that she was so comfortable with not knowing—and valued it as an asset—to the point where it could be part of introducing herself to a client. Where a less confident practitioner might need to take up a position of authority, Bainbridge Cohen engenders trust through her willingness to be present and go on the journey with you. She grew up in the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, where her ordinary daily life was filled with people doing things that most of us think of as extraordinary. She credits this unique childhood environment with her belief that anything is possible, with having learnt ‘to accept differences in people as normal and to expect the miraculous’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.158). Her childhood was infused with people who pushed the boundaries of what the mind-body can do, when cultivated and trained. She has taken this assumption of possibility into her work with people with a very wide array of physical challenges and integration issues. She meets each one as if they are her teacher.¹²

Through BMC I have learned that when we actively observe, follow and intelligently train the mind, the body responds. And similarly, when we actively observe, follow and intelligently train the body, the mind responds. This is a model for learning that informs my research and personal philosophy, and accompanies my passion for dance as a creative form that I have had for over thirty-five years. Strengthened by my studies of BMC, and in agreement with Dewey’s assertions from nearly a century ago, I approach my research with an awareness of the processes of mind-body as displaying ‘behaviour so integrated that it is artificial to split it up into two things’ (Dewey 1928, p.7). From this foundation I inquire, with somatic and Buddhist practitioners and philosophers, into what is specifically appearing in individual

¹² See also ‘Lineage of BMC: Homage to my teachers’, in Bainbridge Cohen 2008, pp.190-191.

experience, and, from there, what is possible.

The meeting of Buddhist philosophy and somatic methods has led me to explore questions such as: How is mind expressing as body in presence, in relation to the environment? How is body-mind appearing as thinking? As emptiness? How do thoughts move? How do cells think? And how might we work with this relationship to find more ease, fuller expression, and presence in a given moment? These, and endless related questions arising from and within direct experience, are what guide my somatic inquiry.

Block & Kissell (2001) speak of the integrated mind and body as a ‘functional power network,’ at the heart of embodied knowing. Block describes this knowing in part as ‘the ability to interact with a thought or an experience holistically that involves the *integrated power network of the total person*’ (2001, p.6, italics mine). This functional power network, according to Block, ‘includes neural elements, efforts, memory, language, perception and attunement and are found integrated throughout the body, not just in the brain’ (Block & Kissell 2001, p.6). BMC even questions the naming of ‘the brain,’ finding that we have in essence three interdependent ‘brains,’ or complex neural centres, in the head, heart and gut, rather than just the one director in the head (Taylor 2012).¹³ In BMC, intelligence can be found wherever mind is moving, in every body system and every cell.

Block & Kissell (2001, p.8) further suggest that embodiment means embeddedness in the world, in community:

The notion of embodiment is a fully and totally human notion. That is, being embodied implies being embedded as well—embedded in a society, a culture, a language. While embodiment is in one sense a refutation of the Cartesian mind/body polarity, it is more than that. We are not merely embodied as individuals.

This sense of embedded corporeality echoes Varela, Thompson & Rosch’s (1991) argument for the place of mindfulness/awareness and embodied reflection in studies of cognition. It calls for returning philosophical inquiry to the situatedness of the person who is doing the inquiring, something that the immersive, practitioner-led

¹³ Mark Taylor writes as a BMC practitioner and teacher. Also see Gershon (1999) and Buchbinder (2013) for more information on the gut brain and its relationship to the cortical brain. Dr Gershon was the first to popularize the notion of the gut brain in his bestseller *The Second Brain*. More recent attention has been to the role of gut bacteria in everything from mental health to chronic disease. See for example Hadhazy 2010.

research model understands.

In making their case for *The Embodied Mind*, Varela, Thompson & Rosch argue that Western philosophical discourse is mainly a tradition of thinking about human experience in the abstract and theoretical, without the support of embodied awareness (somatic intelligence) as a frame of reference. They contrast this to the Indian philosophical tradition, which ‘was tied (“yoked,” as is traditionally said) to specific disciplined methods for knowing—different methods of meditation’ (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991, p.22). In other words, in Indic traditions, theory has remained tied to embodied, and embedded, experience. They write:

In particular, within the Buddhist tradition, the method of mindfulness was considered fundamental. Mindfulness means that the mind is present in embodied everyday experience; mindfulness techniques are designed to lead the mind back from its theories and preoccupations, back from the abstract attitude, to the situation of one’s experience itself (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991, p.22).

This meaning of the word embodied, tied to mindfulness awareness practice through a lineage of Indian philosophy, denotes meditation practices that anchor the mind’s mercurial attention into present bodily experience, in an ongoing practice of returning again and again to the present situation. This is practiced through repeatedly bringing attention to the breath, posture, physical sensations, visual field, and so on, depending on the specifics of instruction. Reginald Ray (2008) traces the connection between meditation and embodiment back to the beginnings of Buddhism. Ray’s account introduces us to a Buddha who, contrary to many of his contemporaries and even his own teachers, advocated for the importance of tending to bodily sensation (the ‘savvy body’) in the pursuit of enlightenment:

The method that the Buddha discovered was meditation, but, at least according to the tradition, it was unlike any other kind of meditation being taught in his day. The meditation taught by the Buddha and practiced in subsequent Buddhist history is deeply somatic—fully grounded in sensations, sensory experience, feeling, emotions, and so on. Even thoughts are related to as somatic—as bursts of energy experienced in the body, rather than nonphysical phenomena that disconnect us from our soma. In its most ancient form, Buddhist meditation is a technique for letting go of the objectifying tendency of thought and entering deeply and fully into communion with our embodied nature. And hence it leads to ‘touching enlightenment with the body’ or to ‘touching enlightenment in and through the body’ (Ray 2008, p.45).

According to Ray, then, my suggestion of an alignment between somatics and Buddhist philosophy is something that was there in the tradition all along, but somehow lost along the way; lost especially, Ray asserts, in the migration of Buddhism from Eastern nations to the West. He speculates on several possible reasons

for this loss, one of which is a generally higher level of what he calls ‘somatic alienation’ on the part of the Western practitioner/student, due to the dearth of mind-body cultivation practices as described by Yuasa (1987). Following this line of thought, there is a tradition of somatic practices being brought productively to the service of Buddhist contemplation, and perhaps this could be utilized for further benefit.

The newest frontier in BMC is embryology.¹⁴ Within the first eight weeks of gestation following on from conception, through a complex sequence of cellular activity, we create the foundation of our physical bodies, as well as our own nourishment and immediate environment.¹⁵ In the early phases of embryogenesis there is a most potent becoming: the early cells are even *pluripotent*, each capable of becoming any body part or even a separate human being. In a sense, this is our first creative act. The embodied study of embryology adds another element to Yuasa’s question of ‘how the mind-body relationship comes to be,’ when we also consider the event of the coming-to-be of this mind and body. Embryogenesis is a creative series of events, the *poiesis* of the human form, the beginning of embodiment. In my original doctoral research proposal I wrote:

I am interested in this place/time/event where matter is infused with life (or perhaps life creates matter) setting in motion the continual creating of the body-mind, a development which plays out through time. In remembering and imaginatively embodying this becoming, we can meet and consider philosophical questions experientially as well as conceptually. I am curious about how exploring this biological *poiesis* with full somatic intelligence might support our outward acts of creativity, and inform how we continue to create and define our environment and culture through our creative actions.

Grossinger (1986, p.8) notes that ‘even if we propose that a soul or spirit exists apart

¹⁴ Embryology first became part of the BMC practitioner training in 2006, although Bainbridge Cohen and others had been developing the work for several years previous. The first published interview on the development of this work also appeared in 2006, (‘The Place of Space,’ reprinted in Bainbridge Cohen 2008, pp.163-174.) My first exposure to embryology within a BMC context was in 2009.

¹⁵ Within the Western medical system, the embryonic period is specifically defined as weeks two through eight of foetal development (Netter 2002), when the body’s physical structure arises. The subsequent ‘foetal’ period, from week nine through birth, is a time of maturation and overall growth of the body. It is interesting to note that embryological accounts within the Tibetan Bon tradition (which is both pre-Buddhist and part of the hybridization of Buddhism after entering Tibet) also mark the first eight weeks as an active formative period. According to this tradition, although consciousness (*rnam shes*) is thought to enter the womb at the moment of conception, it soon falls unconscious. It remains unconscious until the eighth week, when it ‘wakes up as if from a sleep induced by intoxication,’ the basic plan of the body having been established (Vorndran 2002, p.405). These first eight weeks are a time of constant reorganization, with forms appearing and disappearing. Perhaps consciousness would be unable to keep up with such rapidly changing form. Other traditions note a similarly early phase of ‘generation’ during which the organs form, followed by a period of ‘movement’ and/or ‘growth’ of the foetus (Ghaly 2014).

Embryology inevitably brings up questions of who or what directs the creation of the body. The perspective that ‘we create’ our own spaces of nourishment and immediate environment, and so on, is drawn from Bainbridge Cohen’s teachings, and is meant to evoke a sense of continuity between our embryological beginnings and our current embodiment.

from matter, the embryo weaves these two entities together as organism and psyche.’ The event, or process, of the embryo is the bringing together of the processes we call mind and body (Buddhism includes speech as well); it is the *conception of embodiment*.

Engaging with narratives¹⁶ of embryogenesis from both Western and Tibetan Buddhist sources has provided a rich site of exploration into creative dynamics and the nature of embodiment, as well as into the dynamics of art-making as creativity embodied. For Buddhists, the body is of an aggregate nature, empty, as all phenomena, of an independent fixed identity.¹⁷ The body’s formation is linked to the dynamics of the five elemental forces, and thought to occur around energetic channels, with form arising in response to the movement of *lung*, a Tibetan term which, similar to the Sanskrit *prana* and the Chinese *ch’i* (*qi*), indicates a vital life force circulating throughout the soma.¹⁸ Julie Henderson, founder of *Zapchen* somatics, understands body as ‘very slow mind.’ In Henderson’s description, cited above, body and mind are not only not separate but are both expressions of the same essence at varying degrees of vibration, speed, and apparent solidity. This echoes video artist and Zen practitioner Bill Viola’s writing that ‘nature itself is a form of Mind’ (Viola 1995, p.236).

Western embryology as we now know it has its roots in the eighteenth century, when German anatomist Caspar Wolff published a dissertation arguing for the cellular basis of embryological development in plants and animals. Wolff’s work challenged the established view of preformationism (the belief that the embryo was a small but fully formed body), via a return to the theory of epigenesis (the gradual emergence of new form from other materials) first proposed by Aristotle (Ruffenach 2007).¹⁹ Early in the

¹⁶ My use of the term ‘narrative’ to describe my engagement with embryological development stems from Frances Garrett’s extensive scholarship on Tibetan embryology. Garrett (2007, p.417) proposed a reading of Tibetan embryology as ‘narrative truths’ rather than scientific fact, a perspective that marries well with the experiential approach taken through BMC methodology. Maintaining embryology as a narrative suggests the importance of the developmental story itself, encourages us to ask who the ‘central subject’ of the narrative might be (Garrett 2007, p.418), and allows for variations of the story of becoming based on personal and cultural experiences and beliefs.

¹⁷ Aggregate here refers to the Sanskrit term *skandha*. Literally translated as ‘heap’ or ‘pile,’ the five skandhas—matter, sensation, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—constitute all mental and material phenomena. When these individual aggregates are removed, the self is recognized to be empty (Kyabgon 2001, p.160). Linda Hartley (2002) discusses the five skandhas in relation to the practice of Authentic Movement, as ways of understanding embodied ‘direct experience.’

¹⁸ There isn’t an equivalent word in English for this vital life force. Although sometimes the word *energy* is used, I feel it falls short. Use of the terms in their original language seems to be getting more common among English-speaking writers, especially *ch’i*.

¹⁹ For an interesting historical overview of the epigenesis vs. preformation debate, including its current manifestations, see Maienschein 2012.

nineteenth century, the Estonian scientist Karl Ernst von Baer demonstrated that all mammals develop from eggs and began identifying specific mechanisms of this development. Von Baer is often called the father of embryology, as his work established the science of embryology as a discipline. The embodied anatomy taught in BMC relies on maps provided by this tradition.²⁰ Embryology, as the beginning of embodiment, has been a topic of interest for centuries. While much of the science of embryology is developed through laboratory experiments (often on embryos from other species), BMC takes the information gleaned from this research and activates it through embodied, somatic practices. In this practice, questions of embryogenic patterns and dynamics are therefore also questions of personal ontology, identity, development and relationship. This approach is poetic, narrative and phenomenological; the embryo is allowed to ‘tell’ its own story of becoming through morphological images and gestures. The questions of embodiment are often asked with and of an assumed adult body, fully formed. Bringing embodied exploration to the gestures of embryology and the dynamics of the body-becoming opens up even more complex questions about how form arises, how organisms arise, and how life begins to express through form. I believe this approach to embryology can be taken up without adopting any specific philosophical belief system.²¹ What fuels my interest is engaging with questions of how this life began—how my life began, and yours—and how the dynamics of creative activity continue to be embodied and expressed throughout life. Embryology is science, but it is also equally philosophy, religion, storytelling, and choreography, all based in our own corporeal becoming.

In addition to these aspects of the term embodiment, I also use it to refer to a sense of presence in some kind of form—the making real, tangible, and therefore relatable, of

²⁰ I have been inspired by the work of several contemporary embryologists and biodynamic craniosacral therapists who, following Steiner and Goethe (Steiner 2000), promote embodied approaches to the dynamics of embryology. This includes van der Wal (2003; 2012), van der Bie (2001), Schwenk (1965), Sills (2011) and Blechschmidt (Blechschmidt & Freeman 2004). These practitioners generally describe embryological development in terms of response to natural forces and ‘metabolic fields,’ or as the playing out of movement flows, similar to the formation of other natural forms like rivers and plants. For example Schwenk (1965, p.61) describes ‘a formative principle based on the interplay of movements rather than on material substance. It is movement that takes hold of the substance and moulds it.’ Van der Wal & Glöckler (1997, p.23) promote ‘a participatory embryology and morphology. What we are looking for is not for the cause of things but for their meaning. We are looking for gestures (*Gestik*), for images (*Bilder*).’

²¹ Although not in my area of interest, the politics and ethics of abortion lurk within any discussion of the sentience of the embryo, and many of the more dynamic descriptive accounts of the embryo are connected to pro-life literature, which is not surprising. Articles debating the question of when life begins are easy to find. For an interesting perspective on the way the visual image of the embryo is produced in politically strategic ways, see Gilbert & Howes-Mischel 2004; and Morgan 2006. For a survey of Tibetan Buddhist views on conception and abortion, see Lecso 1987.

something. It is with this sense of the word that I can say that my creative works, such as the dance/film *cast*, embody my research. Or, that the fundamental biological action of cell division embodies differentiation and wholeness. Embodiment allows for perception, relationship, and phenomenological appraisal, and in this way corresponds to the fruition aspect of Buddhist threefold logic. It is the ‘something’ of my thesis title—the artwork, the embryo, the essay, the apple, and so forth. It is the figure as it embodies the ground. This meaning of embodiment implies corporeality, tangibility, physical bearing, being present here on the earth, but also holds a larger sense of the unseen and intangible, and of the creative dynamics at work in what is present. Embodiment is not reification or stasis but can often be misapprehended as such when not viewed as ‘presencing,’ ongoing creative activity within the flux of emptiness.

Creative Activity

The artist’s mind-in-making is not just the result of studied knowledge... or skills acquired; it is always determined by the actual process of making and the depth of awareness one brings to bear during that process....The work of art derives its ‘presence’ from this heightened awareness—from the artist’s presence of mind (Jacob 2004, pp.166-167).

Creative activity, simply stated, is that by which something is made, in which some fruition occurs out of any and all potential outcomes. If emptiness is the ground and embodiment is fruition (the ground embodied), creative activity is the path between them. The activity of path is simultaneously creative and perceptual. In the case of arts creation it is, as in Mary Jane Jacob’s assessment cited above, ‘the actual process of making and the depth of awareness one brings to bear during that process.’ I find it sometimes useful, though deceptively simplistic, to think of these two aspects of path as simultaneous movement in opposite, yet complementary, directions, as over a bridge. In one direction, the trajectory progresses from ground to fruition, from emptiness to embodiment. This is the path of creativity—making something where there was (apparently) nothing before. In my research I explore, discuss and practice two specific instances of this creativity: embryogenesis and art-making. The complimentary activity of this path in a sense proceeds from fruition back to ground. This direction is the perceptual process, the awareness brought to bear, that reveals the ground as present in the fruition, and emptiness (interdependence and impermanence)

as the nature of embodiment.

What I am referring to as these two directions of movement on the creative path are the inseparable activities of action and perception. In Buddhist soteriological terms this is related to the union of skilful, compassionate activity (Skt. *upaya*) with the wisdom (Skt. *prajna*) of perception. Specifically, *prajna* is the penetrating, sword-like wisdom that recognizes emptiness.²² In the case of ultimate *prajna*, perfect wisdom, Sarah Harding explains:

What specifically is known in this sharp intelligence is the nature of mind and everything as emptiness, as a lack of any true or singular, permanent, inherent existence. This emptiness itself is also understood as *prajnaparamita*. So the perfection of wisdom represents both the agent of knowing and that which is known: its own empty nature. The mystery is that these two aspects of the knower and the known are not to be understood in the usual dual form of subject and object but as inseparable, a state that we cannot really conceive of in ordinary dualistic consciousness (Labdrön & Harding 2003, p.26).²³

In the Mahayana and Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist teachings, it is the union of these two aspects of wisdom and skilful means, in compassionate resonance (Skt. *karuna*) that make enlightenment possible, just as the two wings of a bird need to work together, in balance, for it to fly (Trungpa 1991, p.133). Wisdom is realized through connection to the world through action; likewise action is only compassionate and beneficial when motivated by wisdom. As cited in Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, the *Mount Gaya Sutra* claims that 'the path of the Mahayana is twofold: method and wisdom awareness' (Gampopa 1998, p.235). Cited in this same text, the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* also proclaims:

It is said,
'Method without wisdom awareness and
Wisdom awareness without method
Are bondage.'
Therefore, do not abandon either (Gampopa 1998, p.234).

As we need both 'eyes to discern the road and feet to cross the distance' (Gampopa 1998, p.235) in order to reach any destination, method and wisdom awareness must work together to attain the fruition of enlightenment, or, at a relative level, of any beneficial activity. This focus on the simultaneity of skilful activity and clarity of perception as two sides of the same path is one expressed as well by many artists,

²² Translator David Karma Choephel (2009) notes that 'The prefix *pra-* in the Sanskrit word means first, full, prime, and so forth. The root *jna* means to know. Thus the meaning is the prime knowing, or full knowing. The Tibetan word combines the verb *shes* (to know) with the adjective *rab* (best or complete).'

²³ Like many Buddhist terms, *prajna* is used to indicate various levels and kinds of wisdom, acumen, or knowingness. In the next chapter I discuss the 'three *prajnas*' in relation to somatic methodology.

both within Buddhist-inspired traditions such as Miksang, and otherwise. For artists, the path is sometimes expressed in terms of movement between one's inner and outer experiential worlds, as in the two quotes that introduce this thesis. Agnes Martin names 'in and out' as the 'two endless directions' (Martin & Glimcher 2012, inset between pp.40-41), while John Cage noted a change in arts practice (in the mid-1950s) from an outward expression of the artist's vision to an inward movement. He wrote that, 'when Art comes from within, which is what it was for so long doing, it became a thing which seemed to elevate the man who made it above those who observed or heard it. But since everything's changing, art's now going in and it is of the utmost importance not to make a thing but rather to make nothing' (Cage 1961, p.129). The continuum of movement of mind between inner and outer experience is one that is central to my research, aligning creative activity with perceptual activity, and linking somatic and aesthetic experience.

Within a Buddhist framework of emptiness, the dynamics of making or becoming are also inseparable from that of *unmaking*—a dying or dissolution process—the process by which a sound, thought or movement (or a lifetime) fades back into the ground. For example, in Tibetan Buddhist embryology, the building up of the embryo is reliant on the activity of the elemental forces—in the open potential of space, air brings movement and communication, fire magnetizes fuel and enables digestion and growth, water causes cohesiveness that underlies form, and finally earth provides strength and relative stability to complete the form. According to the teachings on death and dying, this sequential building up of the fundamental elements that occurs during embryological development reverses at the time of death. The process of death is by the dissolution of the elements—earth dissolving into water, water dissolving into fire, and so on, until just space remains (Fremantle & Trungpa 2000; Sogyal 1992). This is death as the unmaking of form, as Sogyal Rinpoche describes it: 'the process of dying, with its outer and inner dissolution, is as *a gradual development and dawning of ever more subtle levels of consciousness*' (Sogyal 1992, p.256, italics original). Death is not only the end of life, but also part of life. Apoptosis, or 'programmed cell death,' is absolutely essential to the life of any organism. Food scraps break down into compost to feed the garden and grow more food. The sculptor chips away stone, the poet erases a line, I cut up a segment of film. To create something new, something of the old has to die.

To help guide me in considering creative activity in general, as well as in the specific undertaking of my own creative project within this research, I have looked to those artists who work within a Buddhist paradigm (even if not named as such), and who consciously articulate the dynamics of making, unmaking, perception, and spaciousness/ground/emptiness within their work. The words and artworks of these artists—particularly (in no particular order except for Duchamp, who must come first) Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Agnes Martin, Bill Viola, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Meredith Monk, Deborah Hay, Dove Bradshaw, Robert Irwin, and the participants in the Awake Consortium—have been a great source of inspiration and clarity, have guided me in my compositional choices and allowed me deeper reflection on my creative practice. This is not a contemporary survey of the field, although some of these artists are still currently practicing. Rather, I am tracing a lineage of artists and ideas that have created the conditions in which I am able to do the work that I do.

The middle space of the creative event—the ‘work’ of an art work—is a recurrent theme in the reflective writings of many of these artists, exemplified by (and likely instigated by) Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp articulated an intermediary gap he termed the ‘art coefficient,’ that operates between the artist’s intention and what an artwork actually is and does. The potency of this gap, for Duchamp and a long line of conceptual artists in his wake, can only be activated and brought to fruition by the direct embodied experience of the spectator/participant. Duchamp’s equation not only acknowledges but foregrounds the role of the observer’s perceptions in the creation of a work of art, rather than solely the artist’s hand. The spectator, he wrote, ‘brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications’ (Duchamp 1973, p.140). He describes this as not just an act of witnessing or critique, but one of ‘transmutation’ or ‘transubstantiation,’ where art, presented in its raw, unripened state, is ‘refined, as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator’ (Duchamp 1973, p.140). Duchamp’s art coefficient, this transmutation and refining, I understand as the creative/perceptual activity of making *of*—how the spectator makes something unique of the artist’s work. Duchamp’s revolutionary claim (one of many of such claims), was that artwork can only be completed, or activated, through its interaction with a spectator, in an unknown, immeasurable coefficient that comes to life in the intermediary space between the artist, the artwork

and the individual perceiver. Art, in other words, is interdependent. By radically changing the rules of art, shifting attention away from the virtuosity of the artist onto the perceiver and the process of perception itself, Duchamp freed art to be and do different things, laying the ground of possibility for the birth of the 'conceptual art' movement.

Duchamp's legacy is in many ways the foundation for my training as a choreographer. My university dance training was largely influenced by what was then called a postmodern paradigm, inherited from Duchamp through John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Dunn and members of the Judson Dance Theatre.²⁴ As a student in this lineage, I was provided the opportunity to explore a wide range of movement, from the basic pedestrian (walking, sitting, standing) to highly trained virtuosity. In my honours thesis at Wesleyan University, I traced the development of pedestrian dance in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily by the Judson Dance Theater artists (including Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, and Merce Cunningham) in New York City, along with concurrent developments in visual art, music, and performance art. In composition classes I studied the work of Cunningham, credited with having radically changed the parameters of choreography to democratically embrace all movement, all parts of the body, and all points in space (Banes 2007, p.49). I practiced and witnessed improvisational performances, in which the performance is composed in and of the moment, by a 'thinking and creating body engage[d] in action' (Foster 2003, p.8). I learned techniques and choreographic scores developed by Hay, Paxton, and Rainer (whose famous *No Manifesto* (1965) asserted a quotidian, everyday performance persona, saying 'no' to spectacle, virtuosity, and style).

Elizabeth Dempster (2008, p.23) notes how the pedestrian turn taken by the Judson Dance Theater marked the undoing of the binaries of the modernist aesthetic, such as

²⁴ This lineage is historical but also formative for me personally as an artist. My undergraduate dance degree was completed at Wesleyan University in the 1980s under Susan Leigh Foster. My training at Wesleyan was heavily influenced by a postmodern approach to dance (developed largely by the Judson Church choreographers), as well as collaborations with students in Wesleyan's Cage-influenced experimental music program directed by Alvin Lucier and Ron Kuivila. I studied independently with Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay, and aspired to the 'democratic' body of dance that Sally Banes attributed to the Judson Church choreographers, often casting untrained dancers in my work. Note that the term 'postmodern' carries a slightly different set of meanings in dance discourse than in other areas of the humanities, indicating a choreographic paradigm that embraced the use of everyday movements, pedestrian settings, and indeterminacy. For further discussion see Daly et al 1992; Banes 1987; 1993.

those between art and life, or performer and spectator, newly asserting ‘an affinity or continuity between the body of the dancer/ performer and the body of the spectator’ through the use of non-trained dancers as performers and everyday movements as dance. Indeed, Dempster argues the newfound inclusion of those everyday movements previously thought to be ‘left over’ (outside the virtuosic language of modern dance or ballet) was not only indicative of a ‘pedestrian vocabulary’ (sitting, walking, standing), but a pedestrian *operation*, a new way of asking questions with, and defining the terms of, choreography. What I received from training in this lineage was permission to experiment in my making, and encouragement to think about how the making operates within these intermediary spaces—between art and life, between performer and spectator, between theatre and street. This experimentation was nurtured in a climate of movement equanimity—what now strikes me as a rather Buddhist idea, that all forms of movement expression (and indeed expression through any medium) have equal potential value. I was drawn to noticing everyday, incidental choreographies, and generated a pedestrian aesthetic and specific movement vocabulary through observing people on the street, in the library, at the beach, on television, and in magazine photographs. I cast untrained dancers in much of my student work, preferring the ‘naturalness’ I saw in their efforts and stage presence. My academic dance training encouraged me to reflect on the process of composition and my choreographic choices, and to cultivate faith in the knowledge generated and synthesised through my dancing and choreography. I was taught that dance-making mattered.

What I did not know at the time was that this training was part of a Buddhist-inspired lineage. Duchamp had first introduced the pedestrian as art as early as 1913 with the creation of his first readymade, *The Bicycle Wheel*. Lee (2004) and Baas (2004, 2005) make a strong case for the influence of Buddhism on Duchamp’s life and art practice. Baas (2004, p.20) points to the obvious similarities between the *Bicycle Wheel* and a Buddhist prayer wheel. Both objects are functional in their own way. A prayer wheel, spun by Buddhist practitioners to kinetically send out prayers, is symbolic of the wheel of dharma (the Buddha’s first teaching is often described as ‘the first turning of the wheel of dharma,’ followed by two subsequent ‘turnings’). Duchamp said of his readymade, which was literally a bicycle wheel attached to an upturned stool: ‘To see that wheel turning was very soothing, very comforting, a sort of opening of avenues

on other things than material life of every day' (Baas 2005, p.87). A tectonic shift occurred in Duchamp's marriage of the art work with real-life function and intention, the highlighting of action and activity over object, a shift which took the focus off of purely material achievement and on to the ongoing movement of thought and perception. Baas asserts that the key paradigm shift of conceptual art, namely 'the realisation that art resides not in the mind of the artist or in the art object, but in the mind of the viewer.... parallels the Buddha's insight that suffering resides not in events or objects but in our minds.' She continues:

Duchamp's theory of how art worked was the precise opposite of the 'It's art because I say it is' attitude often ascribed to him. The practice Duchamp initiated with his *Bicycle Wheel* shifted attention from artistic product to process, and shifted responsibility for that process to the perceiver. These shifts produced a profound change in the relationship of artist to artwork and audience that definitively altered the cultural landscape of the twentieth century (Baas 2004, p.20).

Cage was also influenced by studying Zen Buddhism with Daisetz Suzuki and Alan Watts, although he later wrote that he did not want his work 'blamed on Zen' (Cage 1961, p.xi). Although Cage's Zen influence is often cited, he stated that he wanted to 'free Zen of any responsibility for my actions' (Cage 1961, p.xi). In an autobiographical statement, Cage added, 'I have never practiced sitting cross-legged nor do I meditate' (Cage 1991, p.62).

By the early 1950s, Duchamp and his co-conspirators including Cage, Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg, were thoroughly questioning the boundaries between art and life (Tomkins 1976), at the helm of an engaged and highly experimental 'avant-garde' scene.

Rauschenberg famously declared that he wanted to work in the gap between art and life. Cage announced that he wanted to eradicate the difference. Duchamp said he wanted to turn his life into art, and that he believed in the artist, but wasn't so sure about art (Searle 2013, n.p.).

I find it interesting that, in general, the more 'conceptual' this art became, that is, the more focused on questioning the making and perceptual processes, rather than demonstrating specific artistry or technique, the more pedestrian the palette. For some, the artist's hand became practically invisible, such as in Rauschenberg's (1951) *White Paintings*, sets of large panels treated with white house paint. Rauschenberg created these as pristine, flat white surfaces, stripped of any brushstrokes or painterly marks. Even more radical for the time, he maintained the crisp white surface by enlisting other people to repaint the panels in the following years (Roberts 2013, n.p.).

Cage, inspired by the way the utter absence and openness of the *White Paintings* drew his attention to the ever-changing play of light and shadow they revealed, staged his now-famous composition, 4'33", the following year. The title is the length of the piece, which consisted of pianist David Tudor sitting still at a piano on the stage. The score is in three parts, each of a specified length (determined through chance operations), with the sole instruction to the musician: '*tacet*' (be silent, wait). In the silence, the noises in the concert hall became the composition, by chance, according to the conditions of the hall and the surrounding environment, and tempered by the perceptive abilities of each individual in attendance. The framework of measured time, plus the attention of the audience (at least those audience members who didn't walk out) served to cast a composition from whatever arose in the moment. For Cage (1992, p.9), 'A single sound by itself is neither musical nor not musical. It is simply a sound. And no matter what kind of a sound it is, it can become musical by taking its place in a piece of music.'²⁵ Each person in the audience would have made a different piece of music out of the 4'33" of silence, potentially revealing the more subtle ways in which this always already occurs in the reception of any performance piece.

These emerging themes—a focus on process and the audience's perceptions, the welcoming of indeterminacy, and the configuration of the everyday object/event as art, are all marked by an emphatic embrace of the unknown. Cage's 4'33" of silence reveals a trust that something will arise worth attending to, in the process of paying attention. Or perhaps it suggests that everything is worth attending to, without preferring one outcome over another. Similarly, Dove Bradshaw's *Contingency Pours* are a beautiful expression of ontological indeterminacy—made of materials that would change colour and texture over time, indefinitely. They are each a unique collaboration between the materials, the artist's hand that pours, local conditions at the time of making, the elements of temperature and humidity, and time. This work is profoundly poietic, drawing our attention to its own presencing, its *poiesis*—its simultaneous making and unmaking. These open-ended works demonstrate what Martin Heidegger (1977) called the 'unconcealment of being,' related to a poietic, rather than enframing (*Gestell*) approach to relating to the world. As Barbara Bolt

²⁵ This definition, Cage went on to say, 'requires some adjustment of the definition of music which was given by my Aunt Phoebe. She had said that music was made up of melody, harmony, and rhythm' (Cage 1992, p.9). In expanding the definition of music to include all sounds Cage also acknowledged the many musical traditions around the world that don't employ harmony.

writes:

While enframing concerns an ordering and mastery over what-is, *poiesis* involves openness before what-is....the openness before what-is relates to the ancient Greek understanding of presencing. It is a bringing-forth or unconcealment of being. (Bolt 2011, p.80)

As Bradshaw's *Contingency Pours* evolve over time they open up and simultaneously reveal their opening-up, becoming something much more than the artist's hand alone could create, and never becoming anything final. The viewer is required to let go of attachment to form as fixed, much like viewing an intricate Tibetan sand mandala, painstakingly created, then gone in a moment, leaving nothing to hold on to.

Choreographer Deborah Hay speaks of wanting her audience to have 'no place to land,'²⁶ to not assume they know what they are seeing. To know, in the sense of measuring and reification, can close us down to the nuances of perception (as in Julie DuBose's refrain 'letting go, letting go, letting go' cited above). Hay claims not be a Buddhist practitioner, but likens her dance practice (and dance as a way of experiencing the world) to Buddhist themes, in her book, *My Body, the Buddhist* (2000). Her work embodies a willingness—an insistence, even—to dwell in the unknown; it evokes the ephemerality and as-it-is-ness of the everyday world, while also engaging an imaginative process that activates the potential in the space:

As a dancer, I will notice what occurs when I *imagine* every cell in my body at once is getting what it needs moment by moment. The manner in which these *what ifs* can thrill and annihilate the body's reasoning process, overwhelming it with self-reflection, is similar to the experience of beginner's mind in Zen Buddhism. Dance is the field trip I conduct in order to interface with this experience (Hay 2000, p.xxv, italics original).

In the context of practice, art becomes less about the achievement of a perfect object, and more about the field trip, about asking questions, inviting closer examination of what appears and the processes of appearance. This emphasis on experiential process over attempting to create a specific product is also found in the practices of Dharma Art, which Trungpa likens to Ikebana, or Japanese flower arranging: 'you don't try to be artistic; you just chop off certain twigs and branches that seem to be out of line with the flow' (Trungpa 2008, p.133). The *process* involves aligning awareness with intention, openness and precise action.

²⁶ Deborah Hay, speaking in response to an audience member's question, Dancehouse, Melbourne, Australia, 8 March 2014. From my personal notes.

The work of Duchamp and the ‘conceptual’ avant-garde (including Hay) asks the spectator to enter into a similar practice of awareness. As Robert Irwin put it, this art aims to have people ‘perceive themselves perceiving’ (Feinstein 1997). In his pursuit of ‘pure phenomena’ as the essence of the art object, Irwin progressed from traditional painting inside a frame, to modernist abstract painting within the frame, to having the art merge with and extend beyond the frame, to working with pure light and colour, and then to creating gardens and airports and finely landscaped environments, carefully and caringly designed places for people to move through (Diehl 1999). This progression, and his philosophy of art might be summed up in Irwin’s comment:

And here, it’s like I am saying, you know the kind of attention you have been taught to lavish on a Renaissance landscape within its as-if window frame, try lavishing that sort of attention on the world itself. In fact, get rid of the window! Just experience the world! (Irwin in Weschler 2008, n.p.)

His is art that is embedded in everyday experience, as the pedestrian/spectator is embedded in the artwork; the work of art is not only depicting qualities of flux and interdependence, *it is* these qualities. I had the fortunate experience of being immersed in one of Irwin’s landscapes when I visited the Dia:Beacon art gallery in Beacon, New York in 2012. Upon walking into the parking lot, I immediately became aware of the colour and texture of the plants, generously red and vibrant on a clear autumn day (see Figure 4). I realized I was as enamoured by the grounds and the building itself (a repurposed old biscuit-box printing factory) as the artworks within. It was only partway into my visit there that I realized this was all Irwin’s creation, and that I was embedded in the beauty of my own perceptions, thanks to his making.



Figure 4 - Red grasses in the Dia:Beacon parking lot designed by Robert Irwin

In many ways, of all the artists I surveyed, Irwin, through his writings and interviews as well as his work, has assisted me the most in thinking through how to present and identify my performance work as it was developing over the course of this research. Would I bring an audience to a performance? How does the framing of a 'show' change people's perceptions of the work? Would I bring the performance to an unsuspecting audience, create a pop-up or a happening? Would the work go unlabelled? If I don't name/frame the performance in some way, how would anyone know what it is we are doing? (In hashing through this last issue, I wrote in my journal that this option 'needs to include the possibility of immediate death if nobody notices.' In a mobile phone-mediated age, nobody noticing is a very real possibility.)

I had visited Dia:Beacon that autumn day in order to view a collection of paintings by Agnes Martin. I was intrigued by Martin's writings, as well as several descriptions I had read of the experience of viewing her paintings in person, accounts of the dynamic 'play of movement between field and grid' (Bonshek & Fergusson 2007, p.277) that embodies the play between what Martin called the 'exhaustibles' and the

‘inexhaustibles’ of life—temporary form and ultimate ground. Anna Chave writes, ‘For my part, the pleasure that Martin’s art brings me—a pleasure qualitatively unlike that offered me by any other artist—is a sense at once somehow calming and stimulating: a profound sense of openness’ (Chave 1992, p.151). My experience in spending time with her paintings in person (reproductions in books do not do them justice) was similarly profound. While the work appears on the surface to be quite simple in its ordered sequences of lines and grids, there is something in the background field that is subtly vibrant—an alive, activated sense of space without boundaries. In the ‘exhaustibles,’ the lines and gridwork, Martin’s hand was exacting, demanding perfection. Somehow, and it is not all clear to me how, the ‘inexhaustible’ radiates through these grids. It was hard to tear myself away from them.

In Martin’s writings, she names ‘inspiration’ as that element shared between the artist and the observer, similar to Duchamp’s art coefficient in that it is something beyond either person’s individual ego. Martin believed that the artist must always begin by settling the mind (‘seeking the awareness of the perfection of the mind’), to be receptive to this inspiration, which then serves as the ‘guide to the next thing’ (Martin in Haskell & Martin 1992, p.22):

If there’s life in the composition it stimulates your life moments,
your happy moments, your brain is stimulated
Saint Augustine says that milk doesn’t come from the mother
I painted a painting called *Milk River*
Cows don’t give milk if they don’t have grass and water
Tremendous meaning of that is that painters can’t give
anything to the observer
People get what they need from a painting
The painter need not die because of responsibility
When you have inspiration and represent inspiration
The observer makes the painting (Martin in Haskell & Martin 1992, p.14).

Martin’s ‘stimulation’ of life moments, or what Trungpa called ‘freshness,’ is also found more recently echoed in the compiled writings resulting from a two-year project entitled *Awake: art, Buddhism and the dimensions of consciousness*, a consortium of artists, art critics, and meditators convening at the Green Gulch Zen Center near San Francisco. Their aim, to ‘elucidate the common ground between the creative mind, the perceiving mind, and the meditative mind’ (Baas & Jacob 2004, p.9), was approached through an ongoing series of research projects and papers, symposia, and exhibitions, involving more than 50 participants overall. The resulting

book *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Baas & Jacob 2004) is a rich collection of essays, artist interviews, and reflections on practice. Freshness, for these artists, arises through dedication to process and the recognition of impermanence, along with the suffering that comes from attachment to particular forms. Performance artist Marina Abramovic describes her 'first Buddhist lesson' at age 12, of realising the 'temporality of things' upon seeing an artwork dissolve into dirt (Bass & Jacob 2004, p.187). The idea of temporality is what brought her to performance, and her work is still highly concerned with ideas of presence and vulnerability. Sanford Biggers, who creates floor-sized mandalas that 'become activated by break dancing' (Bass & Jacob 2004, p.270), speaks of 'having a visceral, preconscious notion of how to work' (Bass & Jacob 2004, p.205), something he relates to jazz improvisational artists. Kimsooja and other performance artists speak of the sense of 'awakeness' found through performing at the edges of the body's comfort and endurance. This collection, along with Jacqueline Baas' (2005) scholarship tracing Buddhist influence in visual art 'from Monet to today,' and Brauen & Jacob's catalogue for the 2010 *Grain of Emptiness: Buddhism and Contemporary Art* exhibition at the Rubin Museum, proved to be rich sources of inspiration, providing insight into these artists' research practices and helping me to shape my own thoughts and practice.²⁷

Preliminary research questions

My research is interdisciplinary and has aimed to actively engage in methodologies of entanglement, reflection, cross-questioning, and diffraction, or 'reading insights through one another' (Barad 2007, p.71). The disciplines that host and contribute to my research are all based in long traditions of practice, involving methodologies of being present, cultivating awareness, and honing perceptions. My initial guiding questions were therefore open-ended, inviting practice-led conversation amongst disciplines:

- How might specific practices within the disciplines of dance/choreography, Body-Mind Centering, and Buddhism actively inform one another?
- How might I successfully apply experiential investigations in Body-Mind Centering and Buddhist practice to creating dance works?

²⁷ For further discussion of emptiness in the arts, including examples from poetry, prose, music, visual arts and dance, see Gay Watson's (2014) book *A Philosophy of Emptiness*.

- How can experiential learning and tacit knowledge, in particular nonverbal, bodily knowing, be made shareable?

They were a bit forced, to be honest. What I wanted to ask, as I have presented in this contextual review, was more like:

- What happens if I put myself (poetically dwelling) at the centre of this thematic terrain and engage with what arises, with the intention to open an embodied, poetic and philosophical conversation amongst these fields of practice and study?

This fourth question, at the centre of the other three, reflects a trust in and reliance on the ground of inquiry to reveal and support the path of research activity, to produce insight, to fruit.

Further reflections

Remaining in the centre of this research territory, my unique crucible of inquiry where these three disciplines—BMC somatics, Tibetan Buddhism, and creative arts—interlace through practice, has been an effort in some ways reminiscent of sitting meditation. I can't recall a day-long meditation retreat that didn't have me wanting to jump up and run out of the room at least once. With this particular terrain of inquiry, my experience hasn't been so much about wanting to run from it (although that has happened at times), but how to stay with it amidst the lure of more and more information shared by more and more voices. Any one subset of any one of these disciplines could make for years of study. It has required discipline, like the meditator returning her attention to the breath after 'checking out' on a discursive storyline, to repeatedly return to the centre of my questions, while also allowing the inquiry enough freedom to evolve and mature. As the meditation instruction goes, the practice should be 'not too tight, not too loose.' What helped to bring me back to the specific heart centre of my inquiry was the grounding in somatic and contemplative arts practices, and my dedication to the art of the everyday, to seeing the poetic in the pedestrian—through a marriage of art, practice and theory that is embedded and present in everyday life.

The space between thoughts, the basic background emptiness out of which everything

arises, and within which everything that arises is contained, and expresses—this is the starting point when bringing a Buddhist perspective to the research. And yet the work happens in the here and now, with our physical bodies and embodied minds. In this way I need to keep cycling around—spiralling perhaps—between emptiness, embodiment, expression, and perception. In my true experience these are never not connected (research notes).

Chapter 2. Somatic methodologies

What we need is a way of thinking which embraces our motility (Levin 1985, p.104).

We can begin any exploration from a conceptual framework and discover its inherent origins through creative awakening. Or conversely, we can begin any exploration from the roots of our unknowing and discover the pattern as it manifests in expressed form. It is the dialogue and weave between the two that creates the full fabric of our individual, creative, and cognizant self (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.13).

But a moment's reflection reveals that inquiry is radically physical (Johnson 1994, p.35).

Each of the three disciplines named in the previous chapter—somatics, Tibetan Buddhism, and creative arts practice—are practice-based disciplines, and as such already contain a large body of practice techniques. In developing methodologies for this research project, I was interested in extending these techniques into places of intersection; by engaging, for example, in Buddhist philosophical inquiry through somatic methods, or approaching somatic experience poetically, or choreographically. In the first phase of my research I developed a largely somatic methodology based in my prior experience with Body-Mind Centering, mindfulness meditation, dharma arts, and dance improvisation, brought into engagement with academic practice-led research strategies. In this chapter, I describe this somatic methodology as embodied, reflective, emergent, and generative of both poetic image and philosophical insight.

The term *embodiment* has been discussed in the previous chapter. When I describe my research methodology as *embodied*, I mean specifically that the research is conducted with and as a 'savvy body' (Johnson 1994), and that the work brings the 'functional power network' (Block & Kissel 2001) of one's mind and body to bear on the terrain and its arising questions. Somatic research understands body and mind as an 'operational whole,' as Dewey (1928) suggested, but relies on the body's capacity for sensation and action in developing understanding and insight. This definition is experiential, not theoretical, developed over the course of several decades of somatic explorations and movement improvisation as process and performance. A pioneer in improvisational performance, Ruth Zaporah, elaborates a similarly experiential definition:

When I refer to the body, I am also referring to the mind, for the two are known through one another and are inseparable. The body knows itself through the mind as the mind knows itself through the body. Sometimes it is convenient to talk about the body and the mind as separate entities. We can talk about taming or disciplining the body, quieting the mind, relaxing the body, focusing attention. But can you imagine doing any of these without both body and mind?.... We talk about the mind and body as if they were separate but, in fact, it's our attention that is split. Through improvisational practice, awareness expands to hold our entire self (Zaporah 2003, pp.21-22).

My prior training enabled me to bring kinaesthetic sensitivity and somatic intelligence to the terrain of my research and process of asking and responding to research questions.

To conduct embodied research means that I, as a researcher, am embedded in, present to, and in relationship with, the material at hand, and in many cases I *am* the material at hand being researched. Embodied experience has the capacity to be simultaneously subjective and objective, as we are always situated within and as the body that observes, even when observing ourselves. As Richard Shusterman articulates it, body consciousness is

not merely the consciousness that a mind may have of the body as an object, but includes the embodied consciousness that a living sentient body directs at the world and also experiences in itself (and through which it indeed can experience itself as both subject and object) (Shusterman 2012, p.197).

Somatic attention fluctuates amongst pre-reflective sensations, internal dialogue, relationship to the external environment, imaginative suggestion, reflection and periods of integrating what one has learnt by 'taking stock' of the situation in conscious and unconscious ways. At times the body's story is the story, kinaesthetic feeling the main player in the unfolding narrative, while at other times corporeality serves more as the radio, or the wifi, an invisible carrier of information. Whereas the notion of embodied research could imply any research in which the practitioner is physically present and engaged in the research activity, somatic methodology extends embodied research (or, perhaps more accurately, *intends* it more deeply) by privileging kinaesthetically and proprioceptively sourced information in generating new knowledge. Therefore somatic methods require in-depth training and familiarity with the body-mind terrain, an 'expert-intuitive' (Melrose 2007) level of familiarity with somatic experience. The practice of Body-Mind Centering in particular fosters access to 'an expansive range of embodied, sensory information' (Brown 2011, p.64) through rigorous training. An expanded kinaesthetic capacity is useful in many arenas, including dance technique, dance and sports medicine, movement education, well-

being, and various kinds of therapy, as a means of improving mind-body integration, psychophysical awareness, and general functionality.²⁸ It also can be pursued for its own ends, for the sake of enjoyment or curiosity. In the case of practice-led academic research, utilizing an expanded sensory capacity can be a means of asking ontological questions, engaging with philosophical and aesthetic propositions, and generating artworks.

When used in an academic context, somatic methods require the researcher to engage methods of *reflection* that productively convey something of one's personal, interior experience. Thus strategies of reflection become a crucial aspect of the methodological discussion. How to reflect on experience without breaking out of it? How to communicate from the midst of the experience itself, rather than commenting on it from an external vantage point? How to create reflective technologies that are the least invasive to the participant?²⁹ On the other hand, the act of recording can deepen the sense of being listened to, providing (in my case) clarity and focus of intention. To address these issues, I drew on reflective methods developed within the somatic, contemplative and creative arts traditions as well as methods drawn from creative and practice-led research. These include stream-of-consciousness writing, visual journaling strategies such as mind maps (Gray & Malins 2004), and 'dialogic encounters' (Wall 2012) between literature and image, as well as the keeping of a research journal and frequent discussions with peers.

In their treatise on embodied cognition, Varela, Thompson & Rosch note that reflection itself is a form of experience, when performed mindfully:

What we are suggesting is a change in the nature of reflection from an abstract, disembodied activity to an embodied (mindful) open-ended reflection. By *embodied*, we mean reflection in which body and mind have been brought together. What this formulation intends to convey is that reflection is not just *on* experience, but reflection *is* a form of experience itself—and that reflective form of experience can be performed with mindfulness/awareness. When reflection is done in this way, it can cut the chain of habitual thought patterns and preconceptions such that it can be an open-ended reflection, open to possibilities other than those contained in one's current representations of the life space (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991, p.27, italics original).

²⁸ For practical examples of applications of somatics to dance and performance technique see Amory 2010; Beavers 2008; Eddy 2006; Smith 2010. Glenna Batson has written extensively on somatic applications in dance science. See Batson & Schwartz 2007; Batson 2009; Batson, Quin & Wilson 2011).

²⁹ Kent de Spain explores methods of capturing the 'inside' experience of dance improvisers, and noted that his participants needed to be significantly experienced improvisers in order not to be thrown by the methods of data collection. One of the key problems that de Spain articulates is 'how to access "real-time" experiences without disturbing or destroying the improvisational state in which they are occurring' (de Spain 2003, p.28).

As these authors suggest, engaging in reflective experience with awareness of the process itself is key to opening possibilities beyond those dictated by habit and preconceived expectations. Reflective activities are creative activities, generative in their own right. To re-flect is to bend back, to enfold, to create a new proximal relationship (Rotman 2009).³⁰ To reflect on one's embodied experience is to forge a deeper relationship with and understanding of that experience, by offering up ways of articulating and representing that experience, so that it becomes part of the map. This is a way of bringing the experience to some kind of fruition that can be handled and known more thoroughly. The *art* of reflection—what one makes of one's experience, and how—is an important aspect of the methodological crafting, as the choices of *how* to reflect affect what is created.

In order to foster openness to new possibilities, my research methods must be allowed to adapt and change. For the somatic research that anchors this project I have adapted a methodology that is based in the specific methods of the BMC tradition, but is also responsive to and shaped by the *emergent* needs of the study. The creative methodologies likewise emerged in response to the unfolding of the research. For example, in the early phase of my research candidature I did not consciously plan to include photography practice in the research, although I had included photographs in the visual component of my candidature confirmation presentation. It was only through the research process that the significance of the photography practice, and the photographs themselves, emerged. As Estelle Barrett writes, the knowledge generated through practice-led methods 'emerge through material processes. Because such processes are (at least in part) predicated on the tacit and alternative logic of practice in time, the precise operations cannot be predetermined' (Barrett 2010, p.6). While most obviously practice-led, my somatic, dance and creative arts research falls under the wider umbrella of naturalistic inquiry, a methodological approach which is characterised by 'the researcher as primary generator/gatherer of data, the use of tacit knowledge, emergent research design and qualitative methods' (Gray & Malins 2004, p.200). This approach in turn lies within the post-positivist, constructivist research paradigm, which aims to 'understand' rather than 'explain' (Gray & Malins 2004,

³⁰ I discuss this further in Chapter 4 in relation to the gesture of cell division.

p.198).³¹ I believe this includes the attempt to understand the methodology itself and how it operates.

The final characteristic I have listed in describing my somatic methodology is that it is *generative* of both poetic image and philosophical insight. It has been my experience, when engaging in somatic exploration, that striking images will often arise. They may be visual, kinaesthetic, aural, or in combination, like a dream fragment. Like a dream, these images carry their own peculiar logic. Elizabeth Dempster refers to these as ‘spontaneous images,’ those that arise from a practice of deep inward reflection that ‘places a person directly in touch with their own unique world of images’ (Dempster 1985, p.20). Depending on one’s intention for engaging in somatic practice, these images may or may not carry meaning or relevance. In therapeutic contexts, for example, an arising image might offer insight into the source of a particular injury, or suggest a new way of organizing oneself in relation to a particular situation. In conducting somatic-led research, I wanted to encourage thought (meaning, images, information, questions) to arise from physical experience in any form. I wanted to ‘mine’ the somatic experience for ‘data,’ to draw out experiential truths that might contribute to the synthesis of new knowledge. Since the language of somatic experience, when it arises, is often based in imagery, it was important to me to enable the recognition and recording of these images for later reflection. Rouhiainen describes the relationship of poetic language to embodied experience:

in contrast to conventional language, original or poetic language, especially, discloses and articulates what is implicitly contained in pre-reflective experience itself. In so doing, language has the possibility of portraying an infinite range of experiences. This occurs through time when language is renewed as it is applied to new situations, which in turn involves a delay, where pre-linguistic experiences are yet not grasped in a linguistic mode (Rouhiainen 2007, pp.116-117).

The generative aspect of this methodology hinges on discovering what the participant, including myself as a participant/researcher, *makes of* the somatic experience. As Rouhiainen describes, this requires time for immersion, time for immediate churning-up of response, and time for reflection and articulation in relation to those elements that create meaning and relevance in one’s life and practice. ‘When one is retrieving understanding of lived processes and improvisation, it is imperative to allow oneself to be immersed in them and to take sufficient time to gain a sense of their nature’

³¹ For a comparison of BMC, constructivist epistemology and the work of John Dewey see Dyer 2009.

(Rouhiainen 2007, p.117). The understanding retrieved from the immersive experience of somatic research becomes valuably generative when brought to the surface, and when given time for expression, reflection and articulation. It is here at the surface of intelligibility that somatic images can be brought into communication with other voices, other bodies, and other minds. Jude Walton describes the dynamic process of allowing the image to arise (for her, often in stillness), and the sense of ease required to let the image live in all its vividness:

The image can arise from many places....it is a dynamic process and if one tries to hang onto it in too rigid a way it refuses to be caught. It needs though, to be as clear, vivid and fully known as possible before 'letting it go' (Walton 1985, p.23).

In conducting my somatic research, I sought to find ways of balancing those aspects that involve me instructing or giving information—such as specific anatomical, embryological, cellular and elemental ‘truths’ that I gathered from other sources, with allowing space and time for individual experience and processing, for these images to arise through sensing internal movement, writing, sharing writing aloud and watching each other move. I sought to collect the vibrancy of experience without holding on ‘in too rigid a way.’ I liken the process to dropping a pebble into a pond: as fascinating as the pebble may be, the interesting part is the ripples created by the dropping. That is where the action is.

Limitations of somatics as methodology

Somatic approaches often carry an implicit idea of the ideal body, and the ideal way for that body to move through the world. If, as Isabelle Ginot (2010, p.23) claims, somatic techniques have ‘as a backdrop a homogenous, universal, ahistorical, and occidental body,’ how does that limit or otherwise interfere with the discovery process and what the savvy body can reveal? We need to ask if there is an assumed or prescribed body that we are expecting to find. Likewise, if indeed Hanna’s somatics assumed, as Ginot claims, that the body is universal and ahistorical, contemporary cultural studies claims the exact opposite—that each body is co-created by and in relation to the culture, history, family, sexuality, race, and so forth in which it exists. Philipa Rothfield notes the problem that ‘the lived body—*qua* agent of subjectivity—is a filter of difference between bodies’ that challenges any comfortable claims of universality that arise from the ‘dancer’s carefully cultivated sense of lived

corporeality' (Rothfield 2008, p.26).³² Ginot calls for a somatics that 'does not pretend to restore a so-called natural or original body but rather contributes to the reorganization of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of what we call the body' (Ginot 2010, p.25). Somatics and dance practices have the potential to reveal multiple experiences of bodily life, but this potential can be limited by fixed beliefs of what the body is. Cultural and traditional understandings of anatomy, for example, can be prescriptive as well as inscriptive. In a culture that seeks scientific validity, the anatomical maps defined as scientific are often privileged over those that emerge from folk traditions or 'alternative' models such as Polarity Therapy or reflexology, for example. Ginot (2010) cites multiple examples in which the authors of somatics texts include endorsements from medical professionals as a source of scientific validation. And yet scientific understandings change with time. Our knowledge has a half-life (Arbesman 2012). Since BMC is largely premised on information gleaned from Western science, my sense of the tenuousness of the facts frequently impels me to question: What if I lead a somatic exploration of a physiological principle that is later contradicted by a new scientific discovery? What is my responsibility in presenting accurate information in a practice-led philosophical inquiry? How do I make transparent the limitations of my (or anyone's) knowledge while still going forth with confidence in my received wisdom?

In conducting somatics-led research with participants in the studio, I have sought to be aware of my own expectations and how this influences my choice of words and even the tempo at which I speak them, how I guide the conversation, and how prescriptive or open-ended this guidance is. Somatics in education, research, and therapeutic contexts involves the very personal process of making meaning out of internal sensation and awareness of relationships at various levels (Dyer 2009). In the case of somatics-as-research, this highly personal exploration will likely be influenced by the researcher's intentions and beliefs, and the specific aims of the research sessions. For instance, my philosophical and artistic aims involve not only exploring, but also *cultivating* and *fostering* the perception of emptiness through embodied experience and the artworks that I make. At the same time my intention is to remain

³² In a separate article, Rothfield considers the universalizing tendencies of phenomenology ('concerning *the* body, rather than, for example, *this* body' in the work of Merleau-Ponty) in relation to dance practice (Rothfield 2005, pp.44-45). Rothfield argues that the 'theorist's corporeality...functions as a nexus for the development of phenomenological insight,' and thus his or her insight cannot be considered universal.

philosophically open-ended and non-prescriptive, to uphold the view that ‘what actually happens at a bodily level is more, and less, than you could ever imagine’ (Rothfield 2008, p.26). When leading somatizations, I attempt to ride this contradiction by asking questions (such as ‘what do you notice?’) and suggesting possibilities for meaning-making while attempting to minimize any closure of my own narrative of understanding. At times, however, I am aware that I am imposing the meaning *I* make, often as I’m making it, onto the research space. Although I make every attempt to qualify my interpretations as just that, and to leave space for participants to have and share their own interpretive experiences, the overall research project and its outcomes are based in, and certainly biased by, my positioning, beliefs and expectations.

At its most essential, I feel, somatics is a mode of inquiry based on increasing experiential awareness. As Margherita de Giorgi points out, ‘Hanna cleverly defined Somatics first and foremost as an epistemological shift, a mode of thinking produced by a transformation of one’s quality of awareness (Hanna 1985), rather than a group of pre-existing methods to merely assemble and institutionalize’ (de Giorgi 2015, p.61).³³ As we turn to the specific emergent methods utilized in BMC and extended in my research, it is worth keeping this last point in mind. Somatics as epistemology is open-ended and, while always referring back to bodily experience, does not seek to fix that experience in a reified body, but rather recognizes the lived body, or perhaps better put, our multiple and multifaceted ‘lived bodies’ (Rothfield 2005, p.45) as (a) limitless field(s) of potential always in a process of becoming.

Body-Mind Centering methodology: visualization, somatization and embodiment

Dancing is like going on a field trip. My body is the guide and tools, including the tape recorder (Hay 2000, p.2).

The embodiment process in BMC often begins with visualization of specific anatomical structures or functional relationships. This involves gleaning knowledge through, for instance, studying images in anatomy textbooks or looking at models, in order to more accurately envisage internal structures, the full extent of which are often

³³ Hanna did, however, lay out a specific course of exercises in later books and at the Novato Institute for Somatic Research and Training, which he founded. See Hanna 1988.

externally invisible. Bainbridge Cohen (2008, p.157) suggests, for example, ‘after looking at a picture of a particular structure in the body, hold the image in mind as you search to become aware of that part of your body.’ The guidance at this stage is largely coming from outside information—from a book or a teacher. In a practical sense, if you want to understand how to move your knee efficiently, it helps to begin with looking at illustrations, to locate the bones, articulating surfaces and connective tissues of the knee, seeing how the bones articulate, where the ligaments and muscles attach, and so forth. Then you can begin to find these structures and relationships in your own knee, to take the external knowledge inwards into experience. The joints, muscle and connective tissue that make up the knee joint, once identified and sensed, can begin to initiate movement and find more efficient functional relationships and pathways. In approaching the complexities of anatomy, physiology and embryology, it always helps to begin with a clear illustration or two.

The step that happens after visualization is what Bainbridge Cohen has termed *somatization*.³⁴ This ‘is the process by which the kinesthetic (movement), proprioceptive (position), and tactile (touch) sensory systems inform the body’ and guide the exploration (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.157). The somatization process is supported by asking questions, such as, ‘*What do you notice? What are your sensations, feelings, perceptions? How does this affect your movement and your consciousness?*’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.157, italics original). The guide for somatization is more internal than what is followed in visualization, as the process becomes more about how *this* soma (*this* body-mind) feels and responds than how *that* body looks in the book. Somatization as a method is key to BMC’s embodied approach to anatomy, physiology and embryology, and forms the basis of my practice-led methodology in the studio research aspects of my project. As dancer Deborah Hay comments in the quote above, this is fieldwork conducted of and with the dancing body(-mind).

The somatization process is usually framed by the sharing of specific information

³⁴ Although Bainbridge Cohen coined the term ‘somatization,’ the process it describes is also an important component of Ideokinesis, an approach to alignment through working with imagery developed by Mabel Todd. The work of Ideokinesis continued, and still continues, in the work of many practitioners including Lulu Sweigard, Barbara Clark, Irene Dowd, John Rolland, and Eric Franklin. See Todd 1937; Sweigard 1974, Dempster 1985; Dowd 1990; Franklin 1996.

while simultaneously holding space for individual experience and interpretation of that information. For example, if I were to lead a somatization on the liver to a group of students, having first located it within our bodies using pictures, demonstration, and touch, I might share my own experience of the liver's sense of weight, or its relationship to its neighbouring organs and the thoracic diaphragm. In sharing this information, however, I would encourage my students to discover the qualities that they experience in embodying their own liver, which they might access through movement or through hands-on work with a partner. The somatization process is one of discovering and honouring one's own internal experiences, with the guidance of a 'tour guide' who helps clarify and personalize the maps, pointing out landmarks and points of interest along the way.

These two methods of visualisation and somatization are interwoven and form an ongoing developmental practice, in which the universal mapping and the personal experience illuminate and reveal each other. The progression through these two methods, though not linear, leads to a third stage, what Bainbridge Cohen calls embodiment, defined in part as 'the cells' awareness of themselves.' At the stage of embodiment, she writes, '*you let go of your conscious mapping*' (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.157, italics original). Elizabeth Dempster notes a similar progression common to accounts of the process of Ideokinesis, an approach to alignment based on visualization of specific imagery:

The initial stage is one of research, of gathering information, of intellectual preparation of an image. A point is inevitably reached at which a critical mass of information is achieved and no further progress seems possible. A letting go of conscious direction, a forgetting of the problem or the image one is working on is called for.... This releasing of conscious direction allows an intuitive, off conscious mode of thinking to take over (Dempster 1985, p.19).

Bainbridge Cohen describes this intuitive state as the 'fully known consciousness of the experienced moment initiated from the cells themselves....There is complete knowing.... There is peaceful comprehension' (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.157). This is not a 'claiming to have all the answers' kind of knowing, but a felt sense of effortless insight and presence. Embodiment, in this sense, and in my experience, is often a place of more effortless expression, of bonding with or being present with another person, or of compassionate resonance.

Throughout the history of Body-Mind Centering and as part of its maturing into a

school, this kind of somatization and embodiment process has served as methodology in a developmental laboratory. There have been many explorers involved as researchers in this work. Although there is no question that BMC is the brainchild of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, its development is due to the contributions of many people. The lexicon of material that currently comprises the BMC certification courses is the distillation of several decades of experiential data gained through somatic exploration by thousands of people. Bainbridge Cohen claimed, in 1993, to be ‘developing an empirical science—observing, contrasting, corroborating, and recording our experiences of embodying all of the body systems and the stages of human development’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.2). At the time she noted that ‘several thousand people have participated in the study and development of BMC, some briefly and a few for twenty years’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.2), giving the work its breadth and depth of experience from which the BMC principles are drawn. ‘The universal has emerged out of the specific just as the specific has emerged out of the universal. This is part of the nature of the work’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.2). By the time I undertook practitioner training in the 1990s, we were given extensive and detailed notes charting, for example, particular qualities that are associated with each body system, organ, fluid, region of the brain, subcellular organelle, and so forth. Yet the spirit of openness and personal discovery was never lost even amidst the codification and mapping of the BMC ‘system,’ and the student is still always encouraged to listen primarily to his or her own experience. In this way the work continues to evolve and to find individual expression.

The somatization and embodiment process can also be imaginative, as in embodying embryological patterns. In a video recording of Bainbridge Cohen (2010a) leading a class in an embryological exploration, she guides her students in discovering movement patterns and anatomical connections within their *current* physical experience, yet these are patterns that occurred during the first eight weeks of foetal development, in many cases involving structures and relationships which are no longer present in an adult body. The practice thus requires an imaginative, narrative engagement with the material—the story of how our bodies came to be—in a way that embodying structures that are currently physically present does not. Bainbridge Cohen claims that the embryology material involves a practice of ‘re-membering’ pre-conscious patterning, a practice through which we can facilitate more optimal

patterning and alignment in our bodies now. She writes:

This process has already taken place in our developmental history waiting for us to claim it consciously... This is re-membling in the original sense of this word—to be mindful of again. We recognize the truth of this memory through the consciousness of its current manifestation in our bodily awareness and emerging reality (Bainbridge Cohen 2010b, n.p.).

My appreciation and understanding of this three-stage methodology of visualization, somatization and embodiment has deepened with the recognition of a certain parallel between it and a similar pedagogical strategy described in Buddhist study and practice. I mention it in this context as an exemplar of experiential learning that is articulated clearly by both BMC and Buddhist teachers, one that I feel provides a useful framework for understanding the process of embodied inquiry and the cultivation of integrated mind-body intelligence. In Tibetan Buddhist teachings this is known as the three *prajnas*, based in a classical Indian model of three types of wisdom, or ‘critical acumen’ (Dreyfus 2002). *Prajna*, as I introduced in the previous chapter, is, at an ultimate level, the perfect discerning wisdom awareness that recognizes the true nature of any appearance as emptiness. As with most teachings in the Buddhist tradition, *prajna* is also discussed at a relative level, and in developmental and pedagogical terms. ‘The development of wisdom is understood as a continuous outgrowth of the more ordinary forms of knowledge acquired from one’s studies. In this process, the content of the tradition is gradually internalized in three stages’ (Dreyfus 2002, p.165). The overview of the ‘three *prajnas*’—hearing, contemplation, and meditation—refers to this three-stage developmental process of developing insight. The first stage is the student gathering and studying information from outside sources through activities such as reading, listening to a teacher, looking at images and watching demonstrations. This *prajna* of hearing (sometimes called the *prajna* of study) involves the taking in of outside knowledge, similar to beginning with visual images in BMC practice. Neither practice stops here, with the accumulation of information for its own sake; receiving outside knowledge is only the beginning stage. Next is the *prajna* of contemplation, the activity of reflection, of ‘critical insight’ into our received knowledge (Trungpa 1991, p.146). Contemplation means taking time to churn what we have taken in, tinker with it, experiment, see how it sits with us, and have a look at it from all sides. This is the embodied research practice, phenomenology in action, the trying it on in our lived experience of mind and body. I parallel this with the experiential learning activity of somatization; in both

instances what begins as outside information becomes digested, processed, internalized. Through contemplation, we might have an experience of embodiment and direct knowing. This is the third prajna, the higher wisdom born of meditation, when we have ‘studied something so thoroughly, looked into it so completely, that it’s not separate from [us] anymore. It is part of who [we] are, down to [our] very bones and marrow’ (Lief 2002, n.p.). The Tibetan term meaning meditation, *gom* (or Wylie *sgom*), indicates activities of ‘activation’ and ‘bringing into play,’ a kind of animation and lively exchange. In BMC terms this is cellular, embodied knowing that is brought into action. Chogyam Trungpa makes the distinction that this level of wisdom is ‘*knowingness* rather than actual knowledge’ (Trungpa 1991, p.132, italics original). In the developmental view of both BMC and Buddhism, the process is understood as a cyclical, rather than linear, progression, in which the practitioner continually returns to embodied, perceptual experience while incorporating information gleaned from study.

Both of these traditions describe a wisdom that is born of (and borne by) practice. It is reflective, immersive, contemplative practice that gives knowledge the opportunity to become wisdom. The practice is where the theory is tested, lived, and digested. As Asian theatre scholar David George claims, Buddhist practitioners are ‘simply not interested in only knowing something: the whole point of pushing philosophical positions into meditative practices is to turn knowledge into wisdom via experience’ (George 1999, p.43).

My comparison here is not to reduce the soteriological significance of prajna in Buddhist traditions, and its specific meaning at an ultimate level, as the vivid intelligence that recognizes the ‘perfect and full discrimination of all phenomena’ (Gampopa 1998, p.235) as emptiness. My intention rather is to show the sharpness of the inquiry process, and to claim the value that I place on the embodied contemplative experience as a path to knowingness. For me as a practitioner/researcher, this is equally true of my experience when engaged in movement research, Miksang photography practice, sitting meditation, or contemplating a Buddhist or other philosophical text. Prajna, knowingness, or ‘appreciative acumen’ as Herbert

Guenther preferred,³⁵ is an active, penetrating wisdom, the ‘natural bubbling up of curiosity, doubt and inquisitiveness’ (Lief 2002, n.p.) that has the potential to cut through ordinary awareness like a sword. ‘Prajna is where view and meditation meet. The view is our understanding, and practice is how we make it our own’ (Mipham 2003, p.194). The path to wisdom requires personal agency, trustworthy teachers, and a willingness to observe openly, inquire critically, practice, be present with what is, and then inquire some more. As the Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the current head of the Shambhala Buddhist lineage, cautions, meditation is not a way of creating a ‘comfort zone.’ Any honestly contemplative attempts to understand the truth of anything always take us further into the mystery, perhaps ‘a little further than we want to go,’ into deeper levels of knowing (Mipham 2003, p.188).

Somatic research sessions: somatization, reflective writing, and talking-while-moving

From the early days of my research, when I began reading and gathering information, I engaged in a solo movement practice in the studio, exploring written material through moving with it. I would typically bring a text that I was working through into the studio, and alternate reading with movement improvisation and writing. The intention of this research activity was to somatically digest, to engage in a kind of dialogue with the material beyond conceptual thinking—entering the realm of contemplation. When I found something of interest in the reading, or perhaps a place of confusion that I wanted to investigate further, I took it onto the floor, shaped it in space, took it into the push and pull of somatic questioning. There did not need to be a logical connection between the material I read and the movement practice that transpired; the moving was more of a rippling-on effect from reading, it had its own logic. Thinking is a form of movement, and as such the movement of thought is affected by the movement of the body which bears the thought.³⁶ At the same time, the movement of thought can become the movement of speech, song, dance, gesture, or the writing hand. I referred to this practice ‘studio reading,’ an active reading

³⁵ Guenther’s translation of the term as ‘appreciative acumen’ indicates prajna’s concern with what is non-egologically meaningful rather than what is simply known. See for example Guenther 1992; 2001.

³⁶ My use of this term derives from David Michael Levin, who writes that ‘the bearing of the body... is . . . bearing the life of our thinking. Thinking is thus embodied; at the same time, the metaphorical truth of the body, what the tradition has suppressed over a long history, is finally retrieved, finally resurrected’ (Levin 1985, p.90). Levin’s use of the term ‘bearing’ is connected to themes of motility as well as gestation: ‘The etymology of “bearing” focuses our attention on the manifold nature of the body of thought. (i) “To bear” means “to give birth,” “to gestate.” It indicates, therefore, a gesture or movement which is essentially and intrinsically creative’ (Levin 1985, p.91).

of/listening to the author's voice and my own voice, simultaneously. This practice of studio reading moves between the lines of the written past and the unwritten future, in its present embodiment and expression as movement. This is a complex process, requiring negotiation between textual materials, kinaesthetic sensations and arising images, along with the intentions of my practice and curiosity (and sometimes worry) about what it might be producing.

Although studio reading was a fruitful process for me and allowed for creative engagement with texts, in other regards I found solo studio research to be rather infertile. The difficulty for me in the somatization process is in maintaining a conscious focus while also allowing myself immersion. To draw an analogy, in academic writing practice one is often advised to write a first draft freely, without editing, to allow the ideas to flow. Later, the words can be crafted with more consideration. The two activities, of drafting and editing, require a different mindset, perhaps even activating different regions of the brain. Although both activities are writing, they do very different things. So too with somatic research, only the situation is more complicated: in many cases immersion in movement experience requires 'switching off' the analytical functioning of the higher brain, accessing instead the immediate intelligence of the body in relation to gravity, as it knows itself through weight, touch, and sensation. For instance, it is through proprioception that we know where we are in space; the vestibular system in the inner ear and the midbrain gives constant feedback as to equilibrium, balance, and movement through space; this physical information activates the hindbrain, the cerebellum, which integrates movement wisdom and coordination of complex physical skills. Entering the free flow of movement exploration is a complex activity, and a very different kind of activity to reflection on that experience, which is also a complex activity requiring the coordination of many level of nervous system functioning. Of course the complexity of the situation is much greater than this simple analogy, and involves the interrelated activities of (the *movement* of) thinking, sensing, feeling, remembering, moving, resting, resonating, judging, analyzing, planning, framing, comparing, weighing, imagining, conceptualizing, forgetting, making and discovering meaning.

Movement is both action and perception. It is 'the first perception to develop and therefore the most important for survival' (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.114). The

vestibular nerves—those that communicate the experience of movement—are the first of all the cranial nerves to myelinate (develop a fatty sheath of insulation) in utero. Myelination is an indication of regular use. Think of the ease of writing with your dominant hand and the awkwardness of writing with the other—the easier pathways are those which have been myelinated through repetition. The fact that the vestibular nerves myelinate first ‘indicates that we learn first through the perception of movement. Not only is movement a perception, but as the first perception of learning, it plays an important role in establishing the baseline for our concept or process of perceiving’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.115).

As a researcher doing my fieldwork in the studio, while perceiving movement and perceiving *through* movement, I also trace and track my attention, and these activities contribute to the ‘tools’ of my data collection. With this awareness and tracking of sensation, the process becomes something like performance: although alone in the studio there is no performer or audience in sight, the audience is often present as a projection of an imaginary witness. As I move and reflect on movement I also create an other who receives the reflection. The actor Spalding Gray captured something of this complexity, remarking of his reflective performance work: ‘Look at me, I am one who sees himself seeing himself’ (cited in George 1999, p.24). The exegetical process thus begins with the artist/researcher’s initial intention to track, record, remember, perform, improve, and so on.

Bainbridge Cohen describes perception as a cyclical activity, as a way of organizing the complex interplay between our active intention to perceive, the motor act of focusing our attention, our preconceived expectations and our prior knowledge, all of which affect the perceptual experience. Somatic research, indeed any research, requires a version of ‘active focusing,’ the motor activity of selecting what we will tune our perceptions to at any given time. Akin to a ‘dog directing its ears toward incoming sound,’ the sensory activity of perception is based on this active motor attunement. ‘In ourselves, we can see this ... [active]... focusing as motivation, desire, attention, and discriminating awareness’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.117). Active focusing is part of an ongoing loop of motor and sensory activity, known as the perceptual-motor cycle, that is always renewing and recalibrating based on the

integration of new perceptions.³⁷

In order to perceive clearly, our attention, concentration, motivation, or desire must actively focus us on what it is we are to perceive. This aspect of perceiving we have named 'active focusing.' It patterns our interpretation of sensory information, and without this active focusing our perception remains poorly organized (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.6).

Bainbridge Cohen notes that the choice of what we perceive, what we focus on, although a motor action, is often unconscious. Practices such as BMC, contemplative movement, and meditation develop awareness of focus as a choice, and strengthen our ability to direct attention with intention. What I discovered in my solo practice is that it is very challenging for me to maintain the active (motor) focusing required to engage in somatization as research, *and also* engage in open-ended, kinaesthetic (sensory) experience *and* reflection on that experience, when I am in the studio by myself. Alone in the studio, I found it difficult to keep my ears, as it were, directed towards the question. Although this may just be indicative of my individual learning style, I think of the kind of palpable support for focus that arises in the meditation hall or the library. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, BMC talks of the 'mind of the room,' the general tone in a space when a group of people are focusing on a particular activity, sensation, or material such as a physiological system. It is this shared 'mind of the room' that 'tells us where we are' (Bainbridge Cohen 2014) and, like a container, holds the experience for us. For thinking through questions somatically, I have found that I benefit from the collective—from the presence, input and feedback of other people to engage in the cyclical activities of focusing, perception, learning and reflection. In a group research laboratory I was no longer the one 'seeing myself see myself,' but could instead see the movement of connection with other people. I found a structural container that evidenced the material in the room, allowed me to immerse and embed in a practice, to speak from embodied experience, track insights and connections as they arose, and to stay 'on-task.'

I conducted three distinct phases of studio research with different groups of participants. The first two phases followed a similar format and utilized similar

³⁷ The cycle consists of: Preconceived expectations - Pre-motor (Active) focusing - Sensory input - Perceptual interpretation - Motor planning - Motor response - Sensory feedback - Perceptual interpretation. (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.117). In 1992 Bainbridge Cohen changed this term from 'pre-motor' focusing to 'active' focusing, identifying it as a motor activity. She claims that 'our perception of movement, i.e. our interpretation of movement, is dependent upon all our previous experiences of movement, as it is for every other sense. We develop preconceived expectations based upon how we have perceived similar information in our past experiences. These experiences then precede new sensory input' (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.117). See also Linda Hartley (1995, pp.248-250) for an overview of this cycle in her discussion of the somatic nervous system.

methods, which I will describe here. The third phase was concerned with the development of the dance/film, and as such required a different approach. I discuss the details of this third phase in Chapters 5 and 6.

Because of the somatic and highly experiential nature of the research, the success of the project relied on participants who had already cultivated a certain level of kinaesthetic intelligence. There are other research circumstances in which it would be appropriate and fruitful to engage beginners in somatic approaches. However, because my focus here was not on the nature of somatic inquiry itself, but rather on using somatic intelligence to engage with wider philosophical ideas, it was necessary for me to have participants who were already familiar with somatic investigations and dance improvisation. The six people who participated in the first phase of research—exploring the five elements in embodiment—are all accomplished dancers as well as researchers. At the time of our working together, three participants were engaged in higher degrees by research in dance or performance, and three had completed higher degrees and were actively engaged in teaching and/or advising. Each person, in his or her own way, was working at the intersection of dance, movement, performance, and philosophy, and so brought great depth of thought to our research activities. The second phase of research—exploring cell division—included three of the same participants, plus three others who, again, were all very experienced in somatic approaches, and included one higher degree researcher in performance. All nine of these research participants had some prior exposure to Body-Mind Centering, through attending classes with a local practitioner or, in some cases, through attending training courses overseas.

The primary aim of the studio sessions was to interrogate specific material through sharing movement, writing, and reflective discussion. The sessions provided an educational opportunity for the participants while providing me a clear physical anchor in time and space to dedicate to the exploration of a particular aspect of the material. The structure of the sessions was informed by BMC methodology, with appreciation of the approach of the three prajnas. I began by introducing my ideas and current questions for the session and providing relevant background information. I brought in supplementary materials—on anatomy, physiology, embryology, and philosophy—in the form of texts, diagrams, still images and animations. I distilled

essential points to share from my extensive reading, in order to give a grounded overview of the philosophy as an entry to experience, and to contextualize the practice. For some of our meetings the participants would have received material to read or video clips to watch beforehand; at other times I would follow up with reference materials after a session.

From the opening discussion we would transition into a guided somatization, which was the main practice activity of these sessions, as well as the main catalyst for experiences of discovery and integration. The somatization process shifts the locus of meaning-making from the cerebral cortex, or higher brain, where we think *about* things and create concepts, to the full body, where we may experience things more directly, before conceptualizing (Bainbridge Cohen 2008). In BMC terms, we would begin to enter the *mind* of a particular system or pattern of expression, and move or speak from that mind, which is a very different experience than talking *about* that system. Distinguishing the mind of one system from another, according to Linda Hartley (1995, p.xxvi), involves perceiving ‘particular qualit[ies] of awareness, feeling, perception, and attention when we embody a movement pattern or body system; this is the “mind” of that pattern or system, and is an expression of the integrated body-mind.’ Over the course of leading a somatization, my own immediate embodied experience would evolve and deepen. As a participant in the research practice, my understanding of the material would shift as I spoke and moved. By speaking and dancing at the same time, I allowed my words to arise from my somatic, kinaesthetic experience, through movement, and from my immediate observation of my fellow movers. I asked questions as they arose, dropped fragments of thoughts into the space, and commented on connections and discoveries as they occurred. By speaking, attempting to bring the body’s intrinsic logic into the logic of verbal language, I could also identify my places of confusion, the places where I didn’t know what to say. I was narrating my practice—simultaneously kinaesthetic, aesthetic, and philosophical—in the moment it was occurring. Siobhan Murphy notes that ‘becoming a narrator of one’s own practice entails a productive tension between being inside and outside the practice at the same time, an oscillation between immersion in and reflection on practice’ (Murphy 2014, p.187). Having other movers present in the space to narrate *to* was essential to my ability to navigate this tension, to bring immersive knowledge to an articulating surface. I recorded myself speaking during

these somatizations, and subsequently transcribed the recordings.³⁸ This strategy proved very fruitful, providing a direct account of the questions, discoveries, and connections that I made while immersed in somatic inquiry.

Embedding the research in the activity of guiding a group of participants required me to stay focused on the material, on the content, and to articulate my embodied and embedded experience as best I could in the moment. While the transcriptions share the content, they lose the timing and nuance of the recordings, which in turn have already lost the kinaesthetic/cognitive synthesis of moving and talking in which the content emerged. The following transcription, for example, can be read as a short paragraph, but it compacts what was spoken and danced across at least thirty minutes of spacious exploration:

We are constantly becoming space, and space is constantly becoming us. Those are some of the pathways that that happens through. That's also connected to mind and consciousness and thinking, and creating. Physical movement is in the air/wind family, activity, but again it's the space that allows that movement to happen. So just like there's space between the thoughts, there is space between your movements. Which doesn't mean you have to stop, but it's space that your movement arises from, and resolves back into, just like with thoughts. So moving is a kind of thinking. You can allow your body to think about space. You might start to find space in places in your body that maybe you normally think of as being really solid (12 September 2011).

By recording myself speaking I was able to directly draw on and harness this situation of focus and enforced articulation.

...So as we start to pay attention to those systems and those qualities, we're also feeling our relationship with the earth, so we're feeling the play of gravity through our bodies, with that sense of heaviness, and also the sense of structure—the question of how you relate to the force of gravity, how you yield to the earth, how the forces come up through your structure, or not. So much of our physical form, our physical structure is formed by those forces of gravity, the physical forces of gravity from the earth, from our place on the surface of this big planet. So you can play with how the forces of gravity come through your body, and you can see in the building—the beams, the roof, and the outside structures, the trees, things that have their form in relation to what they need to do with the forces of gravity (10 October 2011).

If I had relied solely on notes taken after the session completed, many of my discoveries would have slipped by unnoticed and unnoted. The method is not without its problems: forgetting to turn on the recorder, muffled or quiet voices, and loud rainfall all posed obstacles to my data collection:

There's always an interchange, there's always coming and going, there's always an adding up and taking away in anything, so things that appear to be solid, that just happens at a slower pace or a smaller level. It's not so obvious. (*having trouble hearing 31:30—something about*

³⁸ Excerpts from these transcriptions are included in Chapters 3 and 4, and sample transcriptions are included in Appendix I.

the water element increasing and decreasing being more obvious? It was raining very hard)
(10 October 2011).

Nevertheless I was left with several hours' worth of material to transcribe, and a very useful trace of the research process. In reviewing the recordings of these sessions after the fact, I considered the long pauses in my speech, mid-sentence. During those pauses, I was engaged in the (often invisible) work of finding the right words to articulate something that I understood (or was questioning) somatically and kinaesthetically. In the somatization process, 'the body cells are informing the brain as well as the brain informing the cells' (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.1, fn1). This process of informing and translating takes time, and is both assisted and challenged by the use of language. A verbal suggestion—my organs are supported by their own self-coherence, a property of the water element—creates a somatic response: I sense my organs differently, their tone changes. But the experience of my organs is in a different language to that of the suggestion. I may or may not find a way to articulate this new sensation in words. The words then may reduce the experience or they may enhance it. As Steve Paxton cautions, verbal 'language... can be coercive. We may opt to disregard experiences which don't work in language' (Paxton 1987, p.17). The participants were aware that I was forming ideas and questions through moving, and challenging myself to articulate my somatic experiences in words. As they became more familiar with each other and with the practice, they began to occasionally speak during these explorations.³⁹

In guiding the movement research, I invited the dancers to engage in embodied reflection on how the given material felt in their own experience. There were no limitations imposed on the style, movement vocabulary, or the scope of their movement, except for those dictated by the size of the studio and personal safety. They were encouraged to attend to internal sensation and proprioception, as well as images that arose. They could rest at any time. Each session also included a period of unguided movement, or open dancing, as an integral part of the learning process. The

³⁹ The strategy of speaking-while-moving is one that I hope to develop further in future research projects. I am inspired by Kent de Spain's devising of technology to track dancers' experiences of improvising, specifically his use of two tape recorders: 'the first played a mostly silent tape during which, at random times, my prerecorded voice broke in to say, "report now"; the second, connected to a microphone, recorded anything the improviser said' (de Spain 2003, p.28). The instruction to report would presumably catch the improvising dancer in the midst of experience, cutting through the complex dialectic of immersion/reflection in a particular way. This might be a strategy for intervening in the aforementioned pitfalls of solo practice.

stage, or state, of embodiment, in BMC terms, entails letting go of conscious tracking of our movement experience. At this point we stop trying to find anything. This is time to let the improvisational, active body-mind lead, in movement or stillness, to quiet the inquiring mind and rest in immediate knowing. This integrative, non-directed activity is valued in both BMC and Tibetan Buddhist meditative practices.

Following this movement practice, we transitioned directly into timed stream-of-consciousness writing, without stopping to discuss or edit. This writing strategy is intended to encourage verbal expression as a continuation of one's inner experience of movement, to write while still in the mind of the somatic experience, as opposed to writing an analytical reflection upon the experience from an outside orientation. It is both reflective and poetic. Once the participants were all made aware of the purpose and strategies of this kind of writing, the only instruction given was to write without stopping for a given length of time, usually about five minutes. Some of this written material reads as an account of the practice:

I put my attention to my hand/hands allowing them as distal points to get things done/initiate and my head and my feet and my tail and the attached associated limbs followed. It was a frenetic experience at first—I couldn't bring awareness to all while the actions competed for attention, awareness. I decided to drop what I was doing and make a choice...

Some of it reads as field recordings, discoveries made and notes to remember:

Me: 2 pts of interest:

- (1) Movement/sensation
- (2) The mind of the room

There came a pt when the mind of the room was spacious, still. People weren't moving much ...Q: Were they moving still?

In some cases recalling a felt image led to formulating questions through the writing, which could then generate new imagery or material to explore in movement or writing:

I felt bodiless. I had the sense that 'I' would still be here even without a body. What is movement without a body, or atom or particle? If wind is the movement of atoms, what is moving the atoms? What pushes them?

And:

My face wanted to change, muscles wanted to bust off the skull into movement outwards into space. How strange that as muscles they don't have the agency to move independently. The face needs to be carried if it wants to get from here to there, unlike a limb that can project itself outwards. Mouth as a limb leading the face?

Some of it reads as poetry:

The warmth in my belly spreads down my legs, little kick
flick of the ankle
Image of a fat insect, pulsing at the centre
making its way across the floor
in no time
I inhale
I exhale
The silence in between
The clock ticking rhythm of my feet
Stop!
Go!
Here!

I have used this particular activity of writing upon emerging from movement exploration for many years as an integrative, reflective and generative tool. I find it regularly yields very rich images and connections that I can then draw on to create further writing, poetry, or dance. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly in the context of this research, the process allows me to make connections between my somatic experience in movement and the rest of my life, including philosophical questions and quandaries. This writing emerges from my bodily experience, as one of many of the body's voices, as further expression of what is already occurring in the kinaesthetic and immediate field of action and perception, from the wisdom housed in the experience of my cells and fluids and fascia, through the invitation of mindful movement.

When time allowed, we finished the sessions with reading selections from our writings aloud, followed by an open discussion. In one session I devised a structure on the spot that was particularly effective and satisfying. We were beginning to read our writings aloud, sitting in a circle together, and I felt that we needed to continue moving. I instigated a simple improvisational score, in which one person read aloud, one observed, and the others moved in the space as they liked. When the reader was finished (sharing as much or as little of their writing as they wished), he or she entered the space and began to move. The person observing would then read, and one of the movers would step out to observe. We continued through this score until everyone had a chance to move, read, and observe. In my experience of this activity, listening came alive through moving and through watching movement response, speaking changed when being received through movement, and movement took on new layers of meaning when interacting with the spoken word. This was my experience, corroborated by the others' comments. The words, when spoken aloud

and reflected/refracted by moving bodies, displayed an active, generative power, quite different in impact and effect than reading a record of something that occurred in the past.

Excerpts from the transcriptions of these sessions (from both my speaking during the somatizations and the group discussions) appear in the accounts of practice in Chapters 3 and 4, with participants' writings clearly indicated as such.⁴⁰ These excerpts, in a sense, 'perform' rather than 'represent' the research journey for each individual (Bolt 2004, p.3); that is, they embody the researcher's experience, and act here as short animations displaying the liveliness of the inquiry. Although transposing these words a step further through their inclusion in this thesis, they are shared in the spirit of their original utterance, their present-tense emergence into writing.⁴¹ They also serve as collected data, evidence of a lived practice. The image comes to me now of the colourful detritus found sweeping up the floor after a party: a collection of liveliness that continues to vibrate and resonate after the event.

Dance, embodied mind, and creative activity

The somatic methods I have described here arose in response to the ground of my prior participation in traditions of practice, adapting and maturing in response to the evolution of my questions and discoveries. The methods that I adopted, devised and adapted are anchored in contemplative, somatic and aesthetic epistemological modes that favour experiential, embodied knowingness. In my experience, and in much of the discipline-specific literature, these practice-based epistemologies all lead back to dance—dance as method of inquiry, dance as a somatic mode of thinking and speaking, dance as poetic expression, and dance as metaphor for life as dynamic and ephemeral. The practices of dance, somatics and meditation share similar characteristics. Harrison Blum, in arguing for the restoration of kinesthetic experience in studies of religion, notes that 'both dance and the religious experience require presence in the moment. As a dancer must be cognizant of each muscle sensation, so

⁴⁰ Participants were asked but not required to send me their writings by email, either in part or in full. They consented to the written and discussion material being used for publication. Every participant had the right to refuse publication of any given material. Any quotations of participants' writings or comments are provided anonymously in this thesis as well as in any published work deriving from these research sessions.

⁴¹ In thinking through some of the complexities of how somatic knowledge, dance, and writing intersect I have been inspired by the work of Alys Longley, especially her naming and elaboration of 'movement-initiated writing' (Longley 2011; Longley & Tate 2011), as well as Siobhan Murphy's (2008; 2014) thoughtful reflections on negotiating the relationship between producing performance and writing in a PhD.

too must the devout be attuned to the intention held by the entirety of one's being' (Blum 2008, p.4). Holding intention with the entirety of one's being is an extension of 'active focusing,' which I have presented thus far in BMC terms. It is also a pivotal activity in many forms of sitting meditation and mindfulness practices. Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche speaks of the ability of *shamatha* (peaceful abiding) meditation practice to rein in the wandering focus of the mind, like taming wild horses:

It gives us the potential to have stronger, more focused access to whatever we're doing. We settle down to practice in order to draw in the scattered energy of the wild-horse mind. We're bringing the mind to attention.... We center ourselves in our mind and place that mind on the breath. We gather it to ground ourselves in a healthy sense of self—wholesome, balanced, confident, pliable (Mipham 2003, pp.58-59).

The Sakyong conveys a practice that gradually gathers the scattered dispersed light of our attention into a central stronger, brighter beam of focused intention (Mipham 2003, pp.58-60). The focusing of mind occurs in the body, anchored in the movement of the breath, which, like dancing, connects our sense of body to our sense of space, reminding us of their inseparability.

Even the view of emptiness has been expressed as dance, claiming its qualities of ephemerality and fluctuating materiality. Adyashanti, a teacher of Zen and nondualism, quotes a Zen saying: 'When the realization is deep, your whole being is dancing.' When one has an experience of 'true emptiness,' he writes, 'you are dancing—emptiness is dancing' (Adyashanti 2006, p.102). Other authors and teachers refer to the experience of 'dancing between form and emptiness.'⁴²

Dancing, at the surface, is used as a metaphor for the adept perceptual 'footwork' needed to embrace the coexistence and inseparability of form and emptiness. But I suggest we take this metaphor further, and explore the experience of dancing as a path of insight. When the savvy body-mind apprehends itself, it always discovers dancing. Through somatic attention, we find the body is always moving, as in Steve Paxton's technique called the *small dance*, which involves attending to the ongoing subtle movements and weight shifts that occur when one is standing still (Goldman 2010, pp.105-106). What we might assume at first glance to be stillness (such as 'standing still'), when experienced with full somatic attention, is revealed to be a small dance of

⁴² For example the Aro Buddhism website offers: 'Our spiritual practice consists simply of learning to dance with the emptiness and form of phenomena' (Retrieved 15 May 2015 from <<http://arobuddhism.org/community/form-emptiness-and-non-duality.html>>). Also see Seido Martin 2014.

ongoing corrective movements, shifts, and pulsations based on an ongoing relay of information. The dancer, in both senses of the word—the somatically trained and the one perceiving the nonduality of form and emptiness—embodies a state of flux. Levin writes of the motility body, that attains its ultimate expression in dance and as dance.

Adapting a passage from Heidegger, he writes:

as poetizing, dance is the founding measure [beat, or rhythm] of Being and of the essence of all things.... that...whereby there first comes into the open all that which in everyday movement and actions we find ourselves concerned with' (Levin 1985, p.295).

Dance, for Levin, is the very force of movement that animates our presencing on the earth; 'dancing itself first grants motion and movement their very possibility' (Levin 1985, p.295).

Erika Fischer-Lichte (2012, p.85) writes of a 'radical presence' that collapses the dichotomy of body and mind. Referencing the case of certain theatre performers, Fischer-Lichte describes this radical presence as 'embodied mind':

Through the performer's presence, the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant process of becoming—he perceives the circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy. This I call the radical concept of presence, written as PRESENCE: PRESENCE means appearing and being perceived as embodied mind; perceiving the PRESENCE of another means to also experience oneself as embodied mind (Fischer-Lichte 2012, p.85).

I would extend her description of radical presence ('PRESENCE') to many experiences, even quite ordinary experiences, outside of the theatre. I would certainly include the practice of somatic research as I experienced in myself and witnessed in my research participants.⁴³ And, I believe her experience of PRESENCE is, if not parallel, at least akin to what Bainbridge Cohen calls embodiment, and moving towards what Buddhists mean by the *prajna* of meditation, that is, a state of immediate and nonconceptual knowingness. I also would argue that I witness such *embodied mind*, and experience a direct *knowingness*, through viewing photographs, poetry, sculpture, and film—art forms that carry the traces of the artist's perceptual experience, but are not performed in-person in the same way as live dance or theatre. These forms of art, although not reliant on the presence of the performer, nonetheless can elicit what feels like a transformative circulation of vital energy, to paraphrase

⁴³ I would venture that Fischer-Lichte's concept of 'radical presence' would not be considered so radical in cultures that have not swallowed the pill of mind-body dualism. For example, the (ethnically Tibetan) Yolmo Sherpa people of Nepal include 'presence' as a sign of health, along with 'balance, harmony, wholeness, [and] purity,' in accord with their aesthetic values (Desjarlais 1992, p.88). I am grateful to Philipa Rothfield for bringing this work to my attention.

Fischer-Lichte. The way that artworks embody mind is a mysterious one, and for me it is satisfyingly mysterious, meaning I don't feel a need to figure out *how* this occurs. But it is the key to how my photographs, dance/film and selections of creative writing embody intelligence and presence, and reveal the creative dynamics involved in their own presencing. Thus I return to Marcel Duchamp commenting on his Bicycle Wheel, spinning in his studio on an overturned stool:

To see that wheel turning was very soothing, very comforting, a sort of opening of avenues on other things than material life of every day (Baas 2005, p.87).

Creative activity is about coming to presence: casting a shadow, shining a light, weaving a net, building a website, flashing on an idea, spinning a wheel, and so on. This 'presencing activity' is a thing's poiesis, its embryology, its process of becoming. It interests me that creating artwork, and viewing art, can cause a person to feel more present, more perceptually attuned to the present moment and place. For Crispin Sartwell this is part of the very definition of art:

Art in the true sense, I believe, is a way of becoming fully present in the real, a way for people to experience oneness with things and with one another. What makes certain activities art and certain things works of art... is the capacity of these activities and things to absorb us (Sartwell 1995, p.xi).

He adds, in developing his definition of art, that 'great art has been connected to every great spiritual tradition, because *art is always a crystallised devotion to a world in process*' (Sartwell 1995, p.xiii, italics mine). Engaging with art, for Sartwell, is to engage in awareness of the process nature of the always-gestating world, its poiesis. For Sartwell, and for me, this grounds art in the everyday, through the gift of embodiment.

In the following chapters, I discuss specific phases of somatic and creative research, and demonstrate how the somatic methodologies described here provided a site and means of engaging in interdisciplinary research.

Chapter 3. Embodying the dynamics of the five elements⁴⁴

From the relative view of ordinary mind, divisionless secret Wisdom Mind appears to be divided into inner and outer elements which manifest from subtle and discriminating feeling to increasingly gross and distinct form, appearing internally as flesh, blood, heat, breath, and consciousness, and externally as earth, water, fire, air, and space (Thinley Norbu 1999, p.8).

The first phase of somatic research in the studio with participants grew out of my engagement as a teaching assistant in an Embodied Embryology module through the School for Body-Mind Centering, and my subsequent discovery of the scholarship of Francis Garrett on Tibetan embryological narratives. This chapter discusses an eight-week research phase with six participants that I describe as a ‘practice dialogue’ between Body-Mind Centering and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy.

Background

Although Tibetan Buddhist narratives of embryology vary widely, one of the most prevalent models of conception and gestation is based in the natural operations, or activity, that are symbolized by the five elements. According to Frances Garrett:

In most Tibetan accounts of conception and fetal development, the natural elements, which organize and direct the universe and everything that exists within it, play an essential role. Successful conception is said to result from the mixture of the male ‘reproductive substance’ (*khu ba*), female ‘blood’ (*khrag*), and the transmigrating being’s ‘consciousness’ (*rnam shes*), interacting with the energetic processes of the five elements inherent in those three substances. Medical embryologies thus tell us that humans are made up of the same stuff as the universe (Garrett 2007, pp.420-421).⁴⁵

In the Buddhist tradition the material images of the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—are *symbolic* of the five fundamental forces that are integral to all phenomena; the forces, as Garrett writes, above, that ‘organise and direct the universe and everything that exists within it.’ The five elemental energies are featured in traditional Tibetan medicine, cosmology, psychology, and astrology.⁴⁶ As well as describing conception and gestation,⁴⁷ expressions of these dynamics are also of course commonly experienced throughout the natural world. The elements are ‘the

⁴⁴ Much of this material also appears, in a more condensed version, in Sargent-Wishart 2012a.

⁴⁵ Also see Norbu 1987 and Dakpa 1993 for concise summaries of conception and embryology from a Tibetan medicine perspective.

⁴⁶ See Nicholas Egan’s (2011) PhD dissertation for a comprehensive overview of the uses of the elements in Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, meditative practices and enlightenment discourse. Kennard Lipman also provides a concise cosmology, ‘The evolution of our world: Buddhist cosmology according to Longchenpa’s *Wish-fulfilling treasure*’ (Lipman 2010, pp.83-90), which helps contextualize the body as microcosm/universe as macrocosm discourse.

⁴⁷ For details of the process by which the elemental energies gather in the conception and formation of a body, see Guenther 1987; Labdrön & Harding 2003.

very functional interactivity that make change and growth possible' (Lodro Gyelpo in Garrett 2008, p.143). In Tibetan Buddhism and in Tibetan culture, not just embryology but all life in the universe is seen through the dynamic interactions of these five fundamental forces, which continually increase and decrease in relation to one another. The elemental model forms the basis of 'medicine, astrology, the calendar, and psychology, and it underlies the [Tibetan] spiritual traditions of shamanism, tantra, and Dzogchen' (Wangyal 2002, p.1).⁴⁸ Any phenomenon that appears, by this conceptual system, is recognized as the activity and expression of these five fundamental forces of nature.

It is important to emphasize that the elements are not external or independently occurring materials in and of themselves, but properties or qualities of matter *as perceived* through the sense faculties. This connects to the description of *rupa*, or matter, in the Pāli canon as something which is 'capable of being sensed' (Lusthaus 2014, p.46):

It is never a materiality which can be radically separated or isolated from sentience. Such a non-empirical category would appear ludicrous to the Buddhist. Its ability to be sensed is not accidental, but rather precisely its essence.... Rupa is not a substratum or substance which has properties of sensibility; it functions as sensibility, perceivable physicality. 'Matter,' just like everything else, is finally defined in terms of its function, what it does, not what it *is*. Rupa is sensed, since it is itself sensorial (Lusthaus 2014, p.183).

Lusthaus (2014, p.184) adds that 'the sensorial nature of rupa is born out by the categorization of rupa as the 'Four Great Happenings (mahabhuta, usually mistranslated 'Great Elements') as not simply Earth, Water, Fire and Air, but rather as sensorial qualities, viz. Solid, Liquid, Heat and Motion.'⁴⁹ This translation of the four sensorial qualities as 'happenings' indicates their dynamic nature, reminding us that they are more akin to verbs than nouns, more process than product. Thus what is designated as the element of fire, for example, is the sensation of what we call heat, as well as forces that we experience as magnetization, digestion, and the alchemical process of transformation. Elsewhere Lusthaus (2014, p.46) refers to the elemental properties as 'sensorial textures' that are concretized through our experience. Our

⁴⁸ Tenzin Wangyal, whose work I draw on for this phase of research, is a Tibetan Bonpo master. Bon is the pre-Buddhist Tibetan shamanic religion, which was incorporated into the development of Tibetan Buddhism. Wangyal discusses the elements in Tibetan shamanic, tantric and Dzogchen traditions and practices in his book *Healing with form, energy and light* (2002).

⁴⁹ As in this instance, space is sometimes not included as a fifth element but is a property that allows and pervades the other four. Herbert Guenther writes that the 'indigenous texts speak of either four or five fundamental forces, of which four are particularly instrumental in setting up the physical-material, while the fifth is an openness that reaches into the physical-material, making structuration possible without ever being limited to the resulting structure' (Guenther 1987, p.41).

recognition of the fundamental quality of heat is concretized through our perception of something that is hot—a candle flame, for example—but this is but one expression of the dynamic symbolized by the fire element.

Kennard Lipman (2010) notes that the standard translation of the Tibetan term *jungwa* (*byung ba*, Skt. *bhuta*) to ‘element’ reflects a reductive tendency to render foreign terms into something already familiar, in this case equating *jungwa* with the four elements as classified by the early Greeks.⁵⁰ Lipman, like Herbert Guenther, prefers the more process-oriented term ‘phases,’ rather than elements (derived from Porkert’s term ‘evolutionary phases’). Guenther elsewhere uses the term ‘fundamental forces’ (Guenther 1987). I use the terms ‘elements,’ ‘elemental energies,’ ‘dynamics of the elements,’ and ‘fundamental forces’ in my writing here, as I did in my research sessions, but it is important to keep in mind these shades of meaning.

My interest in the elements arose out of reading Tibetan embryological accounts, although I had been previously exposed to the concept of the elemental basis of the body through death and dying (Tib. *phowa*) teachings with Vajrayana teacher Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, which describe the death of the body as a sequential dissolution of the elements. I was intrigued, on rediscovering the elements through embryology, by the notion of these five interacting forces creating, or becoming, the body. As I read these embryological accounts, I experienced somatic resonations, as distinct aspects of my body systems and structures reflected and responded to the readings. I began to explore the dynamics of the elements through somatization and movement, questioning where and how the elemental classification met a systems classification in my embodied experience (for example, how my sense of the air element as the principle of communication and movement met with my embodiment of the somatic nervous system with its specific pathways and functions). For this research, I drew on accounts of the dynamic functioning of the elements within embryological and death and dying literature, as well as my experience of the five buddha families as taught through the Maitri Five Wisdom Energies Practice, part of the Shambhala contemplative arts program.⁵¹ My aim throughout this phase of research was to

⁵⁰ Lipman cites Porkert’s scholarship here on the translation of the Chinese term *wu-hsing* as ‘five elements.’ Porkert notes that *wu-hsing* indicates ‘5 Evolutionary Phases,’ that indicate their processional and cyclical movement through time. (Lipman 2010, p.92).

⁵¹ I participated in a Maitri Five Wisdom Energies workshop in May 2011 with Acharya Richard John of

facilitate the somatic exploration of these dynamic qualities of matter through embodied experience.

As I have mentioned, most Tibetan embryological narratives include accounts of the elements providing various specific characteristics or qualities. In the extensive account of embryological development given by eleventh century Tibetan saint and yogini Machik Labdrön, the elemental forces function in this way: 'earth provides support, water provides cohesion, fire causes maturing, wind [or air] causes development, and consciousness, or the element of space, provides spaciousness to form the body' (Labdrön & Harding 2003, p.189). Vajrayana master Thinley Norbu Rinpoche supports this account:

Without the earth element, there is no basis for support; without the water element, there is no basis for gathering and collecting; without the fire element, there is no basis for ripening; without the air element, there is no basis for increasing; without the space element, there is no door for expansion (Thinley Norbu 1999, p.67).

This elemental activity can be observed in varying permutations, from very subtle aspects of mind to more obvious expression in outer form. Each element also has an associated colour, a long list of specific sensory and mental characteristics, a direction in space, and associated deities, appearing in a mandala (see Figure 5) with a specific spatial configuration. The associated five Buddha family mandala is foundational to Buddhist psychology, as well as the Shambhala tradition of Dharma Art and Maitri space awareness practices. Although I will keep this discussion focused around embryology, somatics, and embodied experience, one ultimately cannot examine a piece of this mandala without considering the whole. I will reference some of the psychological attributes and connections to the Buddhist path as part of my overall discussion, as drawn from the Shambhala Buddhist tradition.

Shambhala International. Chögyam Trungpa, the originator of this practice, defined *Maitri* as unconditional friendliness, or loving-kindness, especially to oneself. For a history of the development and intentions of the Maitri program see Midal 2004, pp.167-187. For further information on the contemporary teachings of the practice, see <<http://shambhala.org/programs/contemplative-arts/maitri/>>.

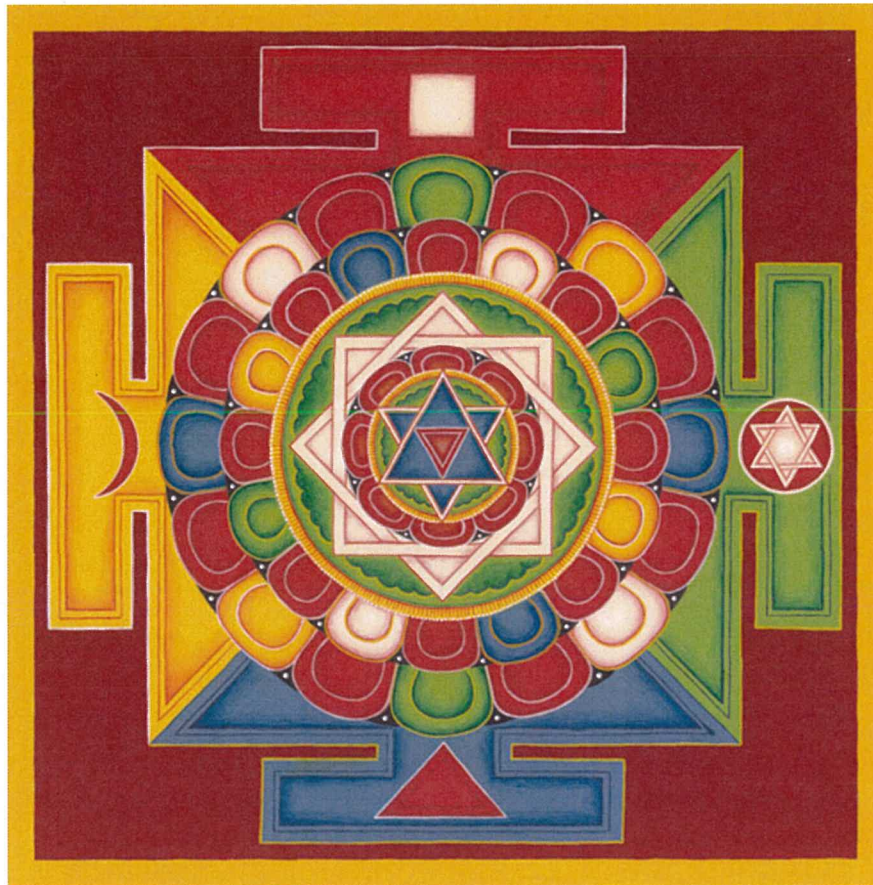


Figure 5 - 'Mandala of the 5 Elements' by Carmen Mensink, 2010⁵²

As Lipman notes, the 'active energy' of these five phases (or elements or families) is the 'dynamism of pure presence,' expressed as five aspects of 'pristine awareness' (Lipman 2010, p.93). Each family is an expression of a different aspect of pure presence, or enlightened mind (*rigpa*). In the Shambhala approach to Buddhist psychology these qualities are also called 'energies,' and they each underlie a quality of enlightened expression as well as a corresponding confused, or neurotic, expression. These energies

are like two sides of the same coin. On the confused side are the core emotional patterns of ignorance, aggression, greed, passion, and envy; on the awakened side are the wisdom of all-encompassing space, mirrorlike wisdom, the wisdom of equanimity, discriminating-awareness wisdom, and the wisdom of all-accomplishing action (Lief 2005, p.278).

⁵² Mandala of the 5 Elements, painted by Carmen Mensink (2010), used with permission of the artist. See <www.tibetanhangkapainting.com>. The Sanskrit word mandala, or *dkyil-khor* in Tibetan, literally translates as 'circle,' or 'encompassing,' and denotes an encompassing geometrical representation of the dynamic appearance of a complete universe, often depicting a central figure surrounded by a retinue on all sides. Tibetan mandalas are 'two-dimensional figures meant to be visualized in three dimensional form' (Andresen 2000, p.365). Herbert Guenther argues, through his analysis of the correlative Tibetan term *dkyil-khor*, that this configuration represents 'a thoroughly dynamic concept that describes the anthropocosmic whole's self-organization in ever-changing and evolving patterns, ebbing and flowing, but always in some sense being the whole' (Guenther 1999, p.149), and so should never be read as a static image.

As seen in the mandala pictured here, the centre figure of the five Buddha family mandala is the space element, which provides the support for all that exists, and forms the fifth element alongside the elements of the four quadrants—earth to the west, water to the south, fire to the north, and air to the east.⁵³ Space is primary (and primordial), containing all of the other elements in potential. Space, like Ground, is before differentiation and also continues on throughout any differentiation. This is according to a Buddhist perspective but is also a finding of the contemporary science of complexity theory—any thing can be broken down into smaller and smaller components (Theise 2005; 2006). When we break things down into the smallest pieces that we currently are able to comprehend, we find space, light and movement, and beyond that, particles that are described as

coming and going in a quantum foam, popping in and out of a generative void, without qualities of space and time as we usually encounter them: no up, down, back, forth, before, after, dark, light; its features are beyond linguistic and, so far, mathematical, description... this is the source from which everything arises (Theise 2006, p.26).

And yet we often don't experience ourselves as space, unless it is suggested by a specific image or practice.

In developing the experiential and embodied study of embryology within Body-Mind Centering, Bainbridge Cohen (2008, p.163) noted that she was introducing the embodiment of space to the BMC lexicon. She noted this in contrast to the embodiment of *structure*, which had been the foundation of the experiential anatomy aspect of the training for several decades. Bainbridge Cohen has articulated an embryological narrative in which we create and inhabit a changing sequence of spaces, both internal and external to our developing physical bodies. With this focus, the embryological embodiment practice is one of re-inhabiting one's spaciousness—what Bainbridge Cohen calls a 'primitive sense of space,' characterized by 'lightness, ease and flow' (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.167).

The formation of the body, from the perspectives of both BMC and Tibetan Buddhism, begins with space. In the BMC approach, the development of space underlies and supports the development of all the body systems. In the Tibetan Buddhist five element approach, subsequent development is articulated in terms of the

⁵³ In some instances the centre figure is of the *vajra* family, associated with the water element and the colour blue.

dynamics of the other four elements: air as movement and circulation; fire as metabolic processes and maturation; water as cohesion and flexibility; and earth as structure and solidity (Wangyal 2002). In the meeting of these two traditions within my research, I have used the overview of the five elements as a way to consider the embryological development and ongoing activity of the body systems within the context of the BMC approach to embodied anatomy. I have also found that experiencing the sequencing of the elemental phases has clarified aspects of the dynamic process of creative activity, how the activity of making something out of nothing, and making nothing out of something, is embodied by a sequential shifting through phases of material presence as symbolized by the elemental energies.

The five elements somatic movement research phase

As my first group phase of studio research, I conducted an 8-week movement practice involving six mature, trained dancers (along with myself as a participant researcher), all of whom have cultivated, through studying dance, BMC, and other somatic approaches, the somatic intelligence of the savvy body: a refined kinaesthetic awareness and an ability to articulately reflect on somatic experience through words and movement. My trust in the participants' somatic intelligence provided a ground in which to propose philosophical ideas as to the formation and essential dynamics of the human body-mind, with guided, improvised movement as the primary site and means of research.

Our research centered on the exploration of the dynamics represented by the five elements—in the order of space, air, fire, water, and earth, reflecting the embryological sequencing—as the fundamental forces that comprise all phenomenal appearance (Clifford 1984; Wangyal 2002). This perspective has not been part of the BMC approach to embodiment. In entering this research practice, I was curious how the five element theory might inform and expand upon the Western understandings of anatomy and development upon which BMC is based, and also how BMC as a methodology might deepen my experience and understanding of a philosophical (and anatomical) system with its roots in a time and culture quite removed from my own. I also wanted to bring the detailed study of anatomy and physiology, from a western perspective, into conversation with the Tibetan accounts, many of which gloss the anatomy in very general terms. And lastly, Garrett maintains that, in the Tibetan

context, ‘the human body is a hot topic in medicine because it is a hot topic in religion, and not the other way around’ (Garrett 2007, p.422), demonstrating that embryology has historically been a venue for discussing spiritual issues, rather than medical. Embryology, as she puts it, ‘appears to have become a place for medical writers to do a bit a philosophising’ (Garrett 2007, p.422). I too was interested in ‘doing a bit of philosophising’ by engaging in the dynamics of embryology through a practice dialogue between these seemingly disparate systems.

I met with the dancer/participants in the studio for twelve two-hour sessions over a period of eight weeks. Beginning with a general introduction and overview, we then explored one element in depth each week, with the last sessions dedicated to review and to experiencing the elements in relation to each other. Our embodiment of the elemental dynamics was grounded in the exploration of specific body structures and systems, developmental and embryological patterns (from a BMC perspective), and guided dance/movement improvisation. The following account is organized from the subtlest element of space through to the densest element of earth, briefly describing the content explored and discoveries made during the sessions. Fuller transcripts of some of these sessions are included in Appendix I.

Space and the experience of possibility

In leading explorations into the space element, I included a focus on: observation of the space in the studio; experiencing the body’s portals (eyes, ears, mouth, pores, etc.) that provide continuity between inner and outer; the potential for communication, exchange, and perception; and the potential space in which any activity or appearance is possible. I led an exploration of internal and external space as generated by the early developing embryo (see Bainbridge Cohen 2008, pp.163-174), and contemplation of the dynamics of movement arising from and resolving into the space of the studio. I suggested considering space as emptiness, containing any and all possibility, by foregrounding the space between thoughts and between movements.

From my speaking while moving and guiding the somatization, as transcribed:

So, at these openings, the activity might have a relation to a specific element, but the actual space that allows that to occur is related to the space element. So with breathing, breath is the air, and the activity of breathing; what allows that to occur is

the space of the nose and the mouth, the windpipe and lungs.... We are constantly becoming space, and space is constantly becoming us. Those are some of the pathways that that happens through. That's also connected to mind and consciousness and thinking, and creating. Physical movement is in the air/wind family, activity, but again it's the space that allows that movement to happen. So just like there's space between the thoughts, there is space between your movements. Which doesn't mean you have to stop, but it's space that your movement arises from, and resolves back into, just like with thoughts. So moving is a kind of thinking. You can allow your body to think about space. You might start to find space in places in your body that maybe you normally think of as being really solid....

After moving I wrote:

You can see me thinking in the space,
writing with 2 hands 2 feet a head and a tail,
writing in air with open heart and mind.
Mind like a sieve but is it sifting things out from the inside
or in from the outside? or a little bit of both.
There's a profundity in the room, simple,
like a landscape,
unrehearsed but present,
not needing anything more but full of potential.
Heart head and guts equally appreciated, equally engaged—muscle; joint.
The sound is AH.
Continuous presence, like the sky embraces all weather patterns.
Look at anything substantial and you can see it isn't solid—
there's space in everything.
Kangaroo's pouch, house with lights on, cupped palms,
between the lines and in the lines.

Through this practice, I felt the space became more tangible as a limitless resource for support, a field of inspiration, and as a continuum between internal and external perceptions. One participant indicated the experience of foregrounding space in writing after moving:

Vast space inside. You can travel through it. Meeting the outside from the inside
I sense the gap between you and me, between me and the floor and the white walls. Taking up
space. This is how much space I take.
This much.

This somatization then led to a lively group discussion concerning our experiences of specific forms of dance improvisation, questioning where movement arises from, and how we choose what to make manifest. Several participants reported a sense of disorientation with foregrounding space, a sense of losing their solid ground of

identity, which is not an uncommon occurrence in Buddhist meditation traditions but could be quite confronting for the physical identity of a dancer. It's interesting to note the consideration of 'my space' and the 'space I take' in several participants' writings:

We constantly become space—space becomes us. My body/movement taking up and producing the shape of space: the space of possibility.

The morphing of movement evolves into a space of becoming...

A continually emerging shape of space. Space in the joints/the space of joints. The space of another: what makes it my space?

In Tibetan Buddhist literature, the space element is not only about physical space, but also represents an aspect of mind or 'consciousness' (Thinley Norbu 1999; Labdrön & Harding 2003), which permeates all phenomena and is fundamental to embodiment.⁵⁴ It is the most subtle of the elements, makes the activity of all of the other elements possible, and is very closely related to the notion of Ground.

In the mandala of the five Buddha families, space is associated with the *Buddha* family ('Buddha' is the name of one of the five families, which are also known collectively as the five Buddha families) and is located in the centre of the arrangement; it is the 'basic coordinate, basic wisdom' (Trungpa 2008, p.100), the foundation of the whole Buddha family universe. Within Dharma Art, the Buddha family/space element is 'the uninteresting part, the waiting for something to happen,' (Trungpa 2008, p.101) although personally I find this part rather interesting. As the ear allows the possibility of hearing sound but is not the sound itself, as the cinema provides the possibility of seeing a film, but is not the film itself, staying with the perception of the space element can bring a sense of restlessness, of wanting some form to relate to.

Agnes Martin's paintings evoke this element, 'a sense at once somehow calming and stimulating: a profound sense of openness' (Chave 1992, p.151). Martin sought in her work to create an expansive, restful place—not a place where the mind goes to sleep or into a stupor, but a wide-awake restfulness. My experience of seeing Martin's paintings in person was of a patient opening-up, a gradual coming to presence, like a shy child warming up to a new guest, with the 'child' being a sense of tangible

⁵⁴ Some sources list consciousness as a sixth element. See Egan 2011.

spaciousness. This is what I continue to strive for in my Miksang photography practice of photographing space.

At the end of the movement research sessions exploring the space element, participants' verbal reports included feeling *jittery*, unsure of what might arise, having *a different attitude to reality, that reality unfurls and there's a sort of not knowing the perspective you're going to take up*.⁵⁵ There was a common sense of groundlessness, of shifting perspectives rather than sensing from one fixed place: *jumping between perspectives or ways of looking at the body*. To me this is reminiscent of the uneasiness one can feel when faced with a blank piece of paper, a new project, standing up in front of a classroom to speak, before beginning, like the 'positive bewilderment' that Trungpa associates with the heaven principle in the Dharma Art teachings (Trungpa 2008, p.155). Returning one's perceptual attention to the qualities of space itself, rather than the feelings that arise, allows us to take the first step, write the first sentence, with a freshness open to potential, rather than habitually responding to a need to *fill* the space.

I propose that a benefit of focusing on the space element is that it allows room for phenomena to spontaneously arise, thereby connecting us to our own ongoing creative activity, our poetic dwelling. It connects us to re-membering our embryological foundations, Bainbridge Cohen's 'embodiment of space versus the embodiment of structure' (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.163), and to how we also incorporate space into our very structure. According to A.H. Almaas (1986), we could include the ego structure as well, which, he claims, shapes and is shaped by the space of consciousness. The spaciousness at the beginning of life, though obscured during the progress of a lifetime marked by a steady stream of mental and physical phenomena, is returned to at death, when the denser elements of biological life progressively dissolve. As silence exists in sound, space exists in form. 'Space pervades all points, so that if we penetrate any point of any manifestation we will ultimately encounter space, the inner openness' (Almaas 1986, p.156).

Air and the dynamics of movement

⁵⁵ Italicized fragments are from participants' comments during group discussion.

The air element is the process of movement, communication and activity. 'Air connects everything. It has to do with every kind of communication [...] The principal quality of air is flexibility; it is free' (Wangyal 2002, p.45). Like space, air is unbounded, but through its activity, air carries the possibility of change. This is where potential begins to get activated. The most immediate experience of air in the body is through noticing the breath, a practice by which one can explore movement through one's internal landscape. Following the opening pathways of breath reveals an aerated, ventilated, porous body.

The body thus revealed is a net, not a mass. It is empty, not full. It refers us, beyond physical sensations, to the geography of the body's landscapes, to a space that connects outside and inside, a global space whose conjugal luminosities the body only diffracts; the body as a passage... (Louppe 2010, p.55).

In leading somatic exploration of the qualities of air, I focused on the physiological pathways of movement through the body, with particular attention to the breath and to the sensory (peripheral to central) and motor (central to periphery) flows of the somatic nervous system. I suggested investigating the action of bringing conscious attention to a specific area of the body, in what Bainbridge Cohen (2008) calls 'active focusing,' the activated intention to sense, and observed how this activity affected our sensations and our capacity to sense. I feel this active focusing is a movement of what Tenzin Wangyal calls *pervasive prana*. According to Wangyal, a master teacher in the Bonpo tradition, there are five kinds of prana, or vital energy, that each relate to one of the five elements. The air element is related to the pervasive prana, which is the basis of communication within and throughout the body. It is the fundamental force of movement that is basic to the various vital activities of the digestive, respiratory, neuroendocrine, and circulatory systems, as well as the movement of awareness through the body. Wangyal introduces this with a simple suggested exercise: 'touch any place on the skin and there is sensation. More subtly, focus the mind of any part of the body and there is sensation. This is all the work of the pervasive prana' (Wangyal 2002, p.80). In this instance, the Tibetan understanding of subtle workings of the body (as) consciousness provided a way for me to explore an experience that is quite common in somatic practices, but is often difficult to describe.

Pervasive prana also connects our internal experience to the outer world, and underlies how we share our emotional state with other people, as well how we create

and appreciate things in the world. I led participants in observing this movement of mind as their attention shifted throughout the body, but also throughout the room, rather like tuning the dial on a radio. The connection between inner and outer world brings attention to the endpoints of the body—hands, feet, head (face and sensory organs) and ‘tail’ (pelvic floor and genitals)—the places where ‘things get done.’ At these endpoints, human beings have the highest concentration of nerve endings, enabling accuracy of sensation and fine motor skills, for optimal communication. As ‘the main portals through which energy comes and goes, ...the endpoints demarcate the major pathways of movement sequences in the body’ (Aposhyan 1999, p.60), and as such bring us into awareness of the air element dynamic, which underlies all activity and communication with the surrounding (sometimes distant) environment.

Excerpts of participants’ writing after moving:

‘free spirit’
‘something in the wind’
communication (mercury), transportation

My face wanted to change, muscles wanted to bust off the skull into movement outwards into space. How strange that as muscles they don’t have the agency to move independently. The face needs to be carried if it wants to get from here to there, unlike a limb that can project itself outwards. Mouth as a limb leading the face?

Clear sensation of energy streaming through a region of my body, of myself, and seeking an exit point. What density energy is required (wasted) to wilfully contain that outward streaming of chi?

The sensation of following my pleasure. I can move in any direction, but it has to come from where I am. If I start from stillness this is easier to trace. But constant and consistent movement feels best. Movement is feeling. If my blood stops circulating my foot goes to sleep.

Air: movement, breath of cells, breath, moving the chi, moving the moving. Air doesn’t discriminate or individuate—that comes later.

The air element universally represents all instances of movement, including transportation and traffic flow, the internet, thought, and the blowing wind; the movement of mind, or consciousness, through the body, and the movement that animates the body—the breath, the blood circulating—without which the body dies. The movement of mind, the internal circulatory activity, and the movement of the body through space are interdependent. A shift in one will affect the others.

Within Buddhist psychology the air element is related to beneficial activity, and with knowing when to act. It is associated with the *Karma* family and the colour green,

symbolic of growth and the fulfilment of potential. The ultimate integration with the air element through Tantric Buddhist practice is, according to Wangyal (2002, p.80), the ability to transform the body, 'to be present in more than one place at a time,' to transcend fixed time and space through merging fully with the prana of movement and communication. I feel this aspect underlies kinaesthetic empathy, a general term for the experience of observing another person moving, and, as a result, feeling some sense of that movement in one's own body—a phenomenon that is at the centre of some recent discussions about watching dance (Foster 2008; Reason and Reynolds 2010).

Fire and the dynamics of transformation of matter and energy

In the *Dhātuvibhanga Sutta* the Buddha describes the fire element as the force 'by which one is warmed, ages, and is consumed, and that by which what is eaten, drunk, consumed, and tasted gets completely digested' (Bodhi 2005, p.297). Fire is potential energy as well as the combustive activity that consumes and turns this potential into usable kinetic energy. This is the fire that needs to be fuelled for any activity to take place, and the fuel is magnetised, drawn in, as part of fire's activity (as a forest fire sucks oxygen into itself as it moves through the trees). Fire is essentially transformative and alchemical, able to take a material substance and change its apparent characteristics—as burning a candle turns some wax and a wick into light and heat. Fire activity is what lets the apple I eat become dancing, thinking, or writing. Without fire, the potential energy remains in the apple.

Fire is the internal heat of the body, why our breath exhaled is warmer than the breath we inhale. It underlies the process of digestion and nourishment, the crux of which is found in the activity of the mitochondria, subcellular organelles that produce the energy required for cellular activity through aerobic cellular respiration. As mammals, when we eat and breathe, oxygen and glucose are carried through the bloodstream to the cells, and then transported into the cell to the mitochondria. The mitochondria consume the oxygen and glucose, creating energy to power the cell, and thus the whole body. At a mundane level, we might tend to focus on nourishment as the taking in of food and drink, just as we might tend to think of the breath as coming in and out of the lungs—at the level of exchange with the outside world. But the real life-sustaining action occurs at a much deeper level of cellular metabolism. Bainbridge

Cohen has even suggested that rather than waiting patiently at the end of the line for food and oxygen to arrive, the mitochondria actively call the blood to bring the food and oxygen to the cell, thus acting as a kind of keystone to the digestive and respiratory processes, relying on the movement qualities of the air element (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.170).

In the somatic explorations I introduced this dynamic of the fire activity, embodied in the mitochondria, as leading the body's internal circulatory movements. I also suggested observing moments when the potential in a situation was catalysed into a new movement event. On one day several of us moved in the heat of the sun coming in through the windows, finding the resonant heat within us. Another day we moved with (literally) the fiery intensity of a major electrical storm, with lightning cracking through the sky all around our little studio. In these cases I noted how the inner elemental processes resonated with the more tangible outer elements, with this outer display reflecting our inner experience on a much larger scale.

Excerpts of participants' writing after moving:

Fire needs fuel and friction. Sparks fly in the mitochondria of every cell. I think of millions of little sparks rather than one huge effort to move myself and then the moving gets easier. When it gets going it takes less energy to keep it going. Thoughts like sparks and light bulb moments. Fire is contagious. My mind free-associates. Dogs make me think of cats, then collars, then buckles, then shoes. Is this how fire catches?

An underlying process to be tapped into, like a bike—put some energy in and it starts to generate its own energy. Like long-distance running, where at a certain point one slips into a rhythm of breath and motion that starts to gather its own force.

I felt a little bit dangerous, like I might do something utterly out of character. Unpredictable and sparky.

Godlike Achilles. Elemental, energetic Fire—generator of activity. The flash—the thunderbolt of action. Moving the moving. Zeus sends his thunderbolt.

The mitochondria 'call forth' blood/oxygen seduction. The alchemical hinge between internalisation and externalisation. The fold that produces activity not a fold: it's change.

The tremendous sense of power in mitochondrial calling forth: not only demanding input/resources but using them.

Here I see a sense of the creative energy, a questioning of what makes us tick, what fuels our living fire, and a sense of awe at the sheer power of this element. The indiscriminating, free-flow movement of the air element begins to find strength,

passion and power that underlies individuation and maturation. As the group moved together in the studio, I was more aware of individual personalities, preferences and the magnetism of individual will.

My writing after one fire session:

FIRE

Destructive and creative, really at the exact same time.
Instantaneous transformation
Is it a flow? It consumes to create.
What fuel does the heart burn?
Imagine flames in every joint of my body.
The oxygen has to freely flow or it will create a vacuum, and nothing can live in a vacuum.

Flames tease and dance about, they don't follow a straight predictable path,
ravenous, devouring, some trees rely on it for survival and renewal.

Heat rises, cold sinks.
Fire down below,
'fire in the hole!'
Disco inferno

A fire wall,
fire wire.

You're fired.

The elements of space and air are always present as potential, as the basic matrix of existence. The fire element begins to connect embodied subjects to matter, to the outside world, to the materials needed to support our biological life, and, from there, to our emotional, creative, passionate life among other human beings. In the mandala of the five Buddha families, fire is related to the *Padma* (lotus) family, the colour red, and passion that connects us to other people and to the physical world. With fire, we begin to relate to one another as human beings.

Water and the dynamics of fluid cohesiveness and clarity of form

The water element is the beginning of cohesive form, still very fluid—water immediately takes the shape of whatever vessel it is in—yet without the completely unbounded freedom of space and air. Water is the 'basis for gathering and collecting' (Thinley Norbu 1999, p.67). If you put several drops of water on a flat surface and coax them near to each other, they effortlessly combine. There isn't any negotiation as to which drop absorbs which, there is no loss of identity as the two become one, or as

one becomes two again. This cohesive property allows us, as largely fluid-based creatures, to stretch, fold, roll, and shift our state in an instant.

In its self-coherence, I feel that the water element provides clarity of presence, filling out to all of my surfaces, without holding back. From a BMC perspective, the body fluids (or fluid bodies) are about transformation. ‘When uninhibited, the basic fluid medium changes its specific qualities as it transforms from one energy state to another’ (Bainbridge Cohen 2008, p.83). In BMC, the specific fluids (cellular, interstitial, arterial and venous blood, lymph, synovial and cerebrospinal) are characterized by various qualities such as free or bound flow, weightiness or lightness, and variance of rhythm. Sally Gardner, citing the linguist Benveniste, notes that the word *rhythm* originally signified a fluid, changeable form, which is an apt description of how the fluids are accessed through movement in BMC:

Benveniste says that *ruthmos* (rhythm) originally meant form, but form *in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile, fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency.... the form as improvised, momentary, changeable* (Gardner 2010, p.xix, italics original indicating quotation).

In exploring the water element via the changing ‘rhythmic’ appearance of specific fluids, I suggested an ability to transform one’s shape or state with ease, to attend to many disparate places at once, and simultaneously, to be very clear about where one is at any given moment. I led an exploration of allowing the fluids to fill out movement as one transformed one’s shape: *Try to move someplace without bringing the water into it—leaving the water behind—how does that feel?* And then initiating movement through the circulatory flow of the fluids as they move through structure: *So you’ve got the cohesiveness of the water... that effortlessly keeps you together as you, but then also you have this really wide range of expression, the transformability of the water, and kind of a precision and clarity as well... I feel like trusting that cohesiveness gives you a base of support to be able to then express in a wide range. You might find yourself in states or in movements that might surprise you, but still feel like home. It depends on your state today, at this time.*

Excerpts of participants’ writing after moving:

Water fills into space, flows with gravity, effortlessly holds together – doesn’t cling – it easily lets go. A drop, bead of rain smashes on the ground and obliterates its form, then connects to other forms.

Motivation is like a jellyfish....Not too tight, not too loose.... Sponge, meet sea. Fill on up. Water resonates all the other elements but so clearly holds its own. Clear and easy, both light and strong, assuming a shape and changing shape. Fishing and fish.

I find a deep stillness in this place and deep softness. All of me together. All of me breathing. A little roll to the side creates a ripple effect. Ripples in succession. I name not the parts that make up the whole but the whole itself. Rippling from here to there.

Like a tower made of floors of water and someone pushed the top floor just enough to cause all the other floors to shift and slide, and the force and weight of each floor affects the other floor like a perpetual motion machine that never gets too violent or out of control but shifting sliding enough to keep every floor constantly in motion re-acting and initiating.

Entering the more formal, tangible dynamics represented by the water and earth elements begins to touch on the inception of embodiment, of corporeality. I led an exploration of re-membering (through embodiment practice) the very earliest stages of embryological development: the cleavages of division of the first cell into two, two into four, and four into eight. This exploration began with with the water principle within the cells (the cytoplasm) initiating these cleavages, creating cohesive shape though the cells' own fluid integrity, self-containing and self-shaping of the gel-like cellular fluid.⁵⁶ From the self-cohesion of the fluids in cell division, I found a new perspective on the differentiation of our various body parts—the organs in particular—as coming from an intrinsic cohesiveness within these structures themselves. For instance, in the self-containment of the gall bladder as it nestles up under the liver—the clear separation and identity of the two structures is what allows them to be in relationship. The water element underlies this clarity of identity as well as the adaptability of each organ itself.

In discussion, several participants described a feeling of *internal clarity* coupled with the *ongoingness* of movement, and likened it to the experience of dancing a known, set phrase of choreographed movement. Questions were raised by one participant as to the water element properties of thought, and if there is a similar dynamic underlying coherence in thinking. Interesting to note is that two of us (myself and one other participant) independently had the image of the palm of the hand being a mirror; in Tibetan Buddhism the water element, and the *Vajra* (indestructible diamond) family, is associated with 'mirror-like wisdom,' wisdom that clearly sees all, as though reflected in a mirror.

⁵⁶ We then explored the same action of cell division from the earth element, focusing on the containing and structuring activity of the cellular membrane. The cell division exploration was such a potent site of research that I continued to explore this in a subsequent phase of group studio practice, which I relate in the next chapter.

Earth and the dynamics of strength, stability, and yielding to ground

The earth element is the densest expression in form, the most materially present, and is related to qualities of stability, hardness and heaviness. We find this embodied in the structure of the building rather than the functional space within, and in the bones and muscle that give the body its density and frame, rather than the more fluid contents. Yet even these materials—brick, bone, stone—which seem stable and permanent, if examined closely, are in a state of constant change and movement. In bone, for example, an active storehouse of minerals, there are cells (osteoblasts) whose specific function is to lay down bone tissue, and other cells (osteoclasts) whose specific function is to dissolve this tissue, to release its constituent minerals into the bloodstream. What appears solid is in a constant state of flux, and yet there is a tangible dynamic of stability, and of slower, more glacial change, that is symbolised by the element of earth.

To introduce the earth element, I instigated a silent thirty-minute walk through the surrounding neighbourhood to observe material structures and the textures of both organic and inorganic forms. After the walk we shifted into the studio for thirty minutes of silent movement, with the instruction to notice resonance between what was observed outside and the container-like, stabilizing structures within our own bodies. As a group, we then discussed what we noticed, and what our attention was drawn to, on the walk:

Dynamic force through the structures of buildings, being quite still and noticing lines of force through my body—thinking about that within a building, how things hold up, the geometrics.

I was quite taken with the idea that smell is of the earth; it's not something I would normally think.... The other thing that really struck me was the walking and going 'this is earth, that's earth, here's the paperbark tree and I'm smelling it, this is earth as well,' and then thinking that the singularity of things, the variability, the sense in which the one element will manifest in a whole range of ways, so that tension between the kind of total universality of an element, and the very specifics of its manifestations....

I was thinking about the time of earth, there's such a sense of that, ...a slowness, because it's so enduring, that it becomes obvious in my experience. And then trying to judge half an hour....

I noticed I was drawn to buildings, houses, noticing building materials, surfaces, graffiti, colours, and that when I passed people I wasn't so drawn to noticing the people particularly, it was much more about the material environment, the plants that were growing up in the cracks in the sidewalk, and things like a pile of bricks that had fallen over, things that were in unusual places and this little veggie patch in someone's small courtyard, abundance in the middle of what could be fairly desolate.

I had to go pretty slowly to feel like I was supported by the earth but not fighting gravity.

And in movement:

It felt like I was not trying to express anything, just being.

The earth comes up through me, it's that length that you get, some bits are hanging down, bones of the arms are hanging down, so there are different flows or forces, building forces...

I then led a somatic exploration of yielding, which, in the BMC developmental movement paradigm, is the primary action underlying and supporting all other movement. The yield is an active meeting, a 'quality of resting in contact' (Aposhyan 1999, p.64). I suggest that when one yields to the earth one can also feel the earth yield in return, providing support for strength and presence. Yielding is a process that allows one to relate to the environment, assess the situation, and decide what action to take, whether one wants to push away, reach for something, pull it closer, stay or go. From a Buddhist perspective, the yield relates to a 'non-doing,' a purposeful letting go of action for a moment of relaxed but attentive perception. 'The joy of non-doing is that nothing else needs to happen for *this* moment to be complete' (Kabat-Zinn 1994, p.38, italics original); yielding to the present situation with equanimity underlies one's ability to act in ways that are beneficial and efficient.

One participant wrote after an earth element movement session:

There is stillness and moving. Not moody but the e-motion of stone—a sound not unlike silence—sometimes loud, mind numbingly so, sometimes empty but never still...

Muscular meltdown. A substance poised, not leaky but held—secured in place by land. Heavy bottom, alive, rocks this body of water, side to side into the horizon. For it is a horizontal position that keys one into knowing... location. A quiet sensing poured from limb to busy limb, tail to skull, rooted without the slightest idea of cement. I miss nothing and yet what I observe remains ephemeral... a taste so subtle I am hardly aware of the stamp of feet, raindrops, silence, breath, slowing into what moves inside is only partly directed. Easily lifted, easily left or dropped or discarded...

in listening there is returning
middle earth—the layers of soil, rock, elements, permeated flesh—bones are only part of the story. The rest does not exist without lines of interconnection
to others, nature, cycles, time... no, time is on another continuum... to purity of air—an exchange with trees

a slowing but not a shrinking
weight without losing a sense of the current
the impossibility of stillness excites this initiation
timeless, ageless, weightless...

an element of decay

And another participant's writing I feel describes the multivalent experience of body as simultaneously solid and ephemeral, structure and flows:

Everyone seemed to be turning into crystals. Particles and molecules are things to attach to. Weight and gravity draw things close, accumulating layers. Solidity and stability are dynamic forces.... I can't push against nothing.

The primary experience shared in discussion was one of slowness, even timelessness, without the need to do anything or go anywhere. I was reminded of Julie Henderson suggesting that 'the body is just very slow mind' (Henderson 1997, p.216), and I was struck by my own experience of ease and equanimity that arose from resting in the presence of my physical structure:

Feeling equanimity in my bones is a big relief, deep tension evaporates. Eye sockets, shoulder sockets, hip sockets, yielding into slow steady give and take.
Is this evolution?

From a somatic perspective, settling into *being* the body, as slow mind, can offer a basis for embodied meditation and presence. The earth element, related to the *Ratna* (jewel) family, is related to equanimity and abundance.

Sequencing through the elements in a creative process

I devoted our final practice session to sequencing through the elements, beginning with the 'creative' direction (space, air, fire, water, earth) following the sequence suggested by Tibetan embryological accounts. This sequencing describes the manifestation of any phenomenon within the basic ground of emptiness, beginning with space.

During a solo movement research session in which I was preparing for sharing the sequencing material, I came to perceive how the dynamics of the elemental forces could function in a narrative of creative practice in the following way: the element of space provides the opportunity for creative activity. This is, as Trungpa suggests, often a place where anxiety might arise, as when faced with a blank page with nothing to hold on to and shape yet. Within this space there is then the initial movement of the air element, a subtle stirring (we might liken this to the stirring of imagination, the beginnings of an idea) which introduces the potential for expression or activity of some kind. This movement then begins to create some heat, as movement always does, awakening the fire element dynamics. As the fire element begins to burn it

attracts fuel, magnetizing material substance towards itself. In this phase, a potential creative project begins to attract collaborators, funding, materials, and excitement. Things begin to heat up. Through this force of attraction, the cohesion of the water element appears, and various energies begin to come together to create a kind of fluid integrity. The project begins to take shape in a way that the artist can begin to relate directly with it, but is still in process, transforming. And then, as the artwork becomes more solid and more present in the material world, the earth element becomes apparent, and we have tangible form and identifiable structure.

I feel that this narrative, which emerged during my somatic practice, provides an embryological (and cosmological) model that will continue to serve me in creating art and performance works, and indeed is a model I have productively shared with artists and organizational leaders since. Through sensing the somatic qualities of each of these elemental phases, I was able to gain experiential understanding of this process. This occurs within the larger view of the dynamics of emptiness and embodiment presented by Tibetan Buddhism, considering not only form itself but the ongoing path of relationship between Ground (represented by space) and Fruition (represented by earth).

After the movement session sequencing in this creative direction, one participant articulated her experience as follows:

Starting with space, I felt like I had no body at all, just this intention to move. It's a nice way for me to think about movement, compared to how I normally think about it, or how I've been trained to think about it, in a very anatomical way. When we were doing the arm, lifting the arm, in air, I had this image all the way through of being body-less, and in [the] air [element] there was like a sheet layered over it so there was this form...there was sort of this intention to move coming from this very immaterial part of me, layered over me, like dancing a sheet. And then fire, fire was just getting faster and warmer basically. And then water was a real sudden shift of that cooling and cohesiveness, then I just felt like a single drop of water. It felt like the movements weren't... when one movement affects another part of the body, it wasn't a knock-on effect it was more like a transition through. And then there was something about getting to earth, it was still this phantom image that projects this solid hologram... it was just a really useful thing, not just moving my body but moving movement, or, being movement. Dissolving a little bit.

Her comments, on the perception of a 'phantom image' projecting a 'solid hologram,' point to the complementary aspect of this sequencing. While we were exploring the elements in a sequence of creative dynamics, I feel this participant's experience indicates a penetrating wisdom (*prajna*) that is represented by sequencing in the

opposite direction (earth, water, fire, air, space)—recognizing (in her case sensing kinaesthetically) and appreciating the spaciousness within what appears to be more solid form. Herbert Guenther describes these directions of sequencing as complementary, as symbolized by masculine and feminine energies. Of the creative direction, Guenther writes,

This sequence of the fundamental forces in shaping the universe, including the human being, is presented in the *Pancakrama* (I, 19-22), a work belonging to the group of texts classified as father tantras, which deal primarily with the developing phase and emphasize appropriate activity in the sense of planning and designing (Guenther 1987, p.36).

The complementary direction of sequencing—that of ‘appreciative discernment’—is found in the *Hevajratantra*, belonging to the mother-tantras.

This latter movement, which may be seen as restoring the lost unity and harmony by dissolving all contrasts and dissonances and by appreciating the flow of energy throughout the system, is an enfoldment and linking backward to the origin, while appropriate activity is a movement of unfoldment and the establishment of more or less rigid structures that break the original unity (Guenther 1987, p.36).

These are the two complementary activities, of beneficial activity and appreciative discernment, that constitute *making* and *making of*, the creative engagement and perceptual engagement that go hand in hand.

Returning to the somatic research session—following the discussion quoted above, I then led a sequence through the elements in this ‘appreciative’ direction, beginning with earth and finishing with space. This sequence presents the opportunity to observe the progressively more subtle activity of fire, air and space within the more substantial manifestation of earth and water. Beginning with observing and embodying earthy, material substance, I suggested noticing the cohesive properties that give it structure, the creative force of fire that fuels existence, the movement of air that makes any activity possible, and ultimately the space that pervades even the densest object. While the first direction represents the generative process of making something out of no-thing, the latter represents a process of recognizing the no-thing inherent in the something, dissolving the appearance of rigid form into the recognition of fluidity, movement and spaciousness.

This latter appreciative direction is also the sequence of the body’s dissolution at the time of death according to the *Tibetan Book of The Dead* (Clifford 1984; Fremantle & Trungpa 2000; Sogyal 1992), as one element dissolves into another, beginning with

the more substantial earth element, and ending with liberation into space. The Buddhist perspective on death is that it is not simply an ending, but rather an opening out into basic space, which ‘contains birth and death’ (Fremantle & Trungpa 2000, p.1), one stage in the ongoing cycle of rebirth known as *samsara*. If we consider embryology as another stage in this cycle, it adds an interesting perspective to the BMC embryological embodiment practice. For instance, we might consider the question of what it means to embody space when space is considered as the background consciousness and essence of all that is, rather than just a physical factor.

Conclusion

Moving through the elements in these specific sequences, after having explored them in depth individually, highlighted the ways in which the dynamics of the elements underlie movement qualities and states, relationship to gravity, one’s place in the environmental space and the spaces inside, how we inhabit our bodies and even how or what we sense our bodies to be. The participants’ ability to listen intelligently to kinaesthetic sensation, and their willingness to articulate their somatic experience, were critical to the success of this research methodology. As evidenced by their writings, this research practice provided a rich ground of exploration, a wide range of movement experience, and raised many questions for further inquiry.

It is interesting to note that the focus for this phase of inquiry arose as a result of reading Tibetan embryological accounts, but that experientially, the locus of the practice was predominantly in the terrain of the adult dancing body, as informed by Western anatomy and physiology, rather than in specific embryological patterns. However, this active research into sequencing through the elements provided insight, both experientially and philosophically, into the nature of embryology as the foundation for corporeal life. In other words, the essence of embodied life, when apprehended somatically through this five systems approach, is that it is always embryological—a complex dance of appearance and dissolution of a range of densities and qualities of intelligence. Accessing this continuum of densities through which the body continually forms and re-forms proved to be a valuable kinaesthetic experience, prompting new ways to consider and experience corporeal presence, as the dynamics of forces represented by the elements. This experience in turn suggested to me ways to language somatic experience, to describe and express qualities of

presence, motility, fluidity, momentum, magnetization, and so forth. Through focused somatic exploration and reflection, this central aspect of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy can be animated and made relevant for dance improvisation, movement integration, creative arts practice. This practice dialogue also supports the extension of somatic philosophy between Eastern and Western systems of anatomy and physiology, something at the heart of BMC (and suggested by other fields such as Shusterman's somaesthetics) that I feel is in need of further development.

The methods I have described here, that emerged and developed through this first phase of group studio research, continued to effectively and productively support my investigations into the next phase, exploring cell division as the primary embryological gesture, which I discuss in the next chapter.