

## **Explorations within The Small Dance**

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The small dance is – first of all - standing. It is highly simple and in a way given by nature. You could just stand and make a million discoveries. Maybe that is the best way.

On the other hand the small dance is a very complex and it might be hard to enter the fascination of the world of small dance if you don't really know what you are looking for. With the following notes I want to share my discoveries, which I imagine to be helpful to find and enjoy the small dance.

### **My struggle for a definition**

The small dance is continuous exploration for the least necessary muscular effort to maintain a movable vertical alignment.

The small dance is listening to how the body reflexes communicate with gravity, muscles and bones to stay in an effortless, continuously changing alignment.

The small dance is listening to how gravity invites the bones to find the best possible alignment in each moment.

The small dance is standing. Standing is inviting gravity to align the bones.

The small dance is a dynamic play of creating alignment. The players are: gravity, bones, joints, any kind of internal movements, reflexes and an observing mind.

The small dance is to stand with minimal muscular effort, while witnessing the reflexes of the body to prevent us from falling.

The small dance is a physical meditation of doing nothing and realizing how much is happening.

The small dance is a meditation of letting go 'the doing' and entering 'the being'. It contains questions (and answers) around the topic of becoming present and physical available...

The small dance is the point of presence, where nothing has to happen but everything is possible.

The small dance is highly simple and in a way given by nature.

The small dance is very much me. It is my body with its impulses and reflexes and it is my alert mind that empathically observes and gives some playful suggestions.

### **Standing – the basic position of the small dance**

The small dance is not limited to the standing position. Any posture that requires a sense of balance is available for a small dance practices. The more fragile - but still grounded - a balance the more interesting... Standing is the most exciting...

Standing has the potential to be the closest we can get to the sensation of 'floating in water'. The vertical alignment of the bones take away the muscular effort to fight gravity. And the fluids in the joints provide the floating movability.

Standing is a dynamic process. It is continuously losing balance into a tiny

fall until the body reflexes direct the fall into the next moment of balanced alignment.

Standing is a dynamic process. It is continuously losing balance and regaining a new balanced alignment through the activity of body reflexes. The loss of balance can be initiated by any joint that is part of the vertical chain of bones that make us stand upright. A tiny fall with a certain gain of momentum gets redirected by the adjustment of other joints. The small dance is the listening to this unpredictable patterns of momentum and readjustment that travel through the body.

### **Standing – my teaching images and phrases for a first rough alignment**

My basic image is the following: If you stand in water until your navel and you push down the water with both hands leaving a gap in the middle (index fingers and thumbs touch each other)... a fountain jumps upwards between your hands. Imagine, the weight of your shoulders dropping down supports the spine rising up like the fountain.

Weight falls energy rises up.

Muscles do the least necessary work to align the bones.

Bones collect the weight and send it down towards the middle of the earth.

As an answer from the ground energy rises up through feet and the long bones of the legs following the undulating spine to the top of the head and further.

Heels are plumb line under the sit bones.

*(It is a rather narrow stand. Measure the distance between your sit bones – however you do that - and put the centre of the heels into the same distance. The lines from heels to the in between of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> toe are about parallel. But of course each body has a slightly different alignment...)*

Weight is shared between heels and balls of the feet.

Lower legs balance on the arc of the feet.

Thighbones balance on the bones of the lower legs.

Legs are long (no plie). Knees are not blocked. They can move backwards and forwards.

Sacrum sits in the V-shaped seat of the pelvic bones sending its weight down.

Lower back lengthens and widens. Pubic bone is gently lifted upwards towards the lower ribs. A little muscular response closes the 'mouth' between pubic bone and lower ribs.

The muscles in front of the hip joints lengthen.

*(They nearly stretch. To put the pelvis on the top of the thighbones is for most people surprisingly challenging on these muscles. If they don't open the lower back will remain arched. Or we add a little plie, which allows the pelvis to find its vertical position easily. But then the muscles of the legs have to work.)*

Spine rises upwards from the support of the sacrum like a fountain.

The head is balanced between the ears on the top of the spine, floating upwards like a ball on a fountain. Muscles of the jaw and behind the eyes relax. Light and colours are falling into horizontal looking eyes.

Shoulders rest on the ribcage like saddles on either side of the neck.

Clavicles and shoulder blades drop their weight.  
Ribs are hanging from the spine  
Sternum opens softly like an eye.  
Both clavicles soften and widen.

### **Freeing the ankles**

The idea is to get all joints, which support the vertical alignment, open and available for movement. We could start everywhere but I like to start with the ankles. They are on the base and play a central role in this balancing process. (The atlas-skull connection is another key point... on the other end of the balancing chain.) So,...

Move your arms forward (maximum till horizontal).

Sense your whole body shifting backwards.

Sense the movement in your ankles.

If your ankles don't move you are not well balanced anymore. Your ankles have to move in order to shift your body backwards so that the weight of your arms to the front is balanced. Otherwise the balls of your feet receive more weight and the muscles on the backside of your body have to work so that you don't fall.

Move your arms forward and then straight up.

Sense your body shifting backwards and back to neutral again.

Sense the movements in your ankles.

You can continue to play with moving both arms into whatever direction and listen to the movements in the ankles. When you stop moving your arms sense the movements in your ankles. Just listen to the balancing movements of your body in your ankles. You could start the small dance from here walking your focus upwards to knees, hips and spine.

### **Breathing**

When your ankles are free and your body is rather well aligned you might sense how the breathing is shifting continuously your weight. While inhaling your torso shifts backwards, while exhaling it moves forward again. You can sense the movement in your ankles.

### **Freeing the neck (inspired by Chris Aiken)**

Ask an Alexander Technique teacher, but if you don't have one try this:

Sense the weight of your tongue in the bed of your jaw. Let the weight of your jaw separate the lower and upper teeth (maybe keep your lips closed).

Sense the weight of your face. Drop your face and allow the head to tilt slightly forward like in a very modest yes. Sense the muscles of your neck opening where they attach to the skull and feel the back of your head lifting upwards.

Imagine you have a face on the back of your head. Sense the weight and let it drop. Feel your forehead rising up.

Play with this for a while and then listen to where your head wants to move and allow the movements to happen. You might start your small dance from here, from a small dance of the head that connects down to the vertebrae of the neck and the rest of the spine.

### **Exploring the realm of standing**

The play of balancing reflexes happens in a certain rather small realm. If the reflexes were much too late we'd fall or at least make a step. If they were just a little late, some muscles have to work suddenly rather hard to prevent us from falling.

Before I am able to listen to my standing reflexes it helps me to explore consciously the area, in which my reflexes can work properly. So...

Stand. Shift the weight softly to one side. Sense the weight shift in your feet. Search for the smallest shift to one side that you can sense and the limit before muscles start working hard. On "the limit" sense the slight compression on your leaning side. But use this information to lengthen through the compression instead of collapsing into it. Go around a circle to all sides. Your head is the body part of the body that describes the largest "circle". Be aware that the back is very limited. The tendons on the front of your ankle shouldn't contract. (So your head actually doesn't describe a proper circle.) Sense the movements in your ankles.

There is another delicious option for the torso-leg connection, which involves more movement in the hip joints. Keep the length of your torso from before. Leave your sternum more or less at one spot so that the pelvis is the body part that describes the largest circle.

Sense the movements in your ankles and especially in your hip joints.

When you come back to pure standing the ankles and hip joints might be free to allow the balancing reflexes to happen and you might be aware enough to witness them.

You might use this as the beginning of a small dance, letting your focus wander up the spine ...

### **Leading – following – letting it happen (the actual practise)**

I experience the small dance similar to a CI dance. In a CI duet I can lead, while listening to the available movement options of my partner in every moment. I can follow my partner, receiving an impulse and observing my freedom, in which ways I can transfer this invitation into my own movements. These roles, of course, can change in any moment. And sometimes both dancers get to the state where they just listen to what is happening anyway. The point of Contact seems to lead. Both partners surrender to the evolving changes of direction, tone and rhythm.

We might call it the flow or the state of intuition. I am witnessing in a state of responsibility, which decisions I make, we make, our bodies make.

The small dance is this kind of dialogue between my listening, observing and directing consciousness and my body with the moving structure and the deeper knowledge about movement, functional anatomy, needs, feelings and desires.

The small dance finds its purest form when I choose the mental state of

listening and observing. I might start in this state to check-in how well connected mind and body already are. If I am not practising every day I usually enjoy to set my mind rather soon into the leading role. I suggest small movements to my body and focus on the physical sensation in or around the involved joints and the evolving muscle response (e.g. as I described in 'freeing the ankles' and 'Exploring the realm of standing'.) I am sensing when my body takes over a movement and transfers it into other dynamics or body parts. I am acknowledging the moments when my body reveals a slight resistance towards a movement I suggest. I might just drop it or I change my suggestion a tiny bit in terms of effort or direction. Basically I am in a doing mode to get my body in motion, in a way that I am able to witness the movements. But my aim is to do less and less. The more open my body becomes and the better my ears for physical sensations become, the less I need to suggest.

Again and again I switch to the role as a pure listener and observer. I try not to produce any movement consciously. I breathe, I might think of some useful directions in my body for a basic alignment but I am basically curious about how my body moves. But often I realize that there are several body parts, which are not fully accessible to let the movements pass through. I could continue listening and see if the situation might change by itself. But I am often not patient enough...

I like to add to this state of 'listening and observing' the idea of *active following*, at least as a transition. I want to open my body for movements. I want to allow and invite movements to happen. The concept of active following means in my practice that I am curious how a balancing reflex is setting free a successive movement pattern through my body. A balancing reflex around the hip joints – for example – can give an impulse that travels spine upwards: It might use the forward-backward undulation of the spine, or it creates a sideways undulation or a spiral. I don't plan how this impulse sequences through my body but I give the intention that it does.

I allow a certain amount of activity and wanting, which is more than to just surrender to what is there. The way that I follow this sequencing with the curiosity of my consciousness is definitely influencing the journey of the impulses effect. It makes it usually longer and larger. The idea of following with a sense of playfulness in it might add some more active choice. I think it is important in this state to admit that I am still in a doing mode even though it is a very subtle one.

I think *active following* means to me to give permission or even to encourage my body to continue an impulse into a sequencing movement. If I am just listening I easily listen to hard and a taste of stiffness enters my body joined by a pinch of doubt. I want my body to follow. And through that I might force more movement than there is actually needed in the necessity to create a new balance in every moment. Basically I give my consciousness a permission to 'make mistakes' and to have a 'dishonest' small dance. It is a soft permission to want too much, in order to get my mind out of a hesitant and

doubting mode and my body available to move and respond. But as long as I am aware of that and I have – in the back of my head – the idea of finding the doors to surrender to the least necessary I am on a good path.

Once my body feels the permission to move through all its joints on this micro level I put any consciously produced muscle activity out of this very small dance. I am stepping back with my wishing and wanting and enter the world of witnessing the playful game of breathing and balancing reflexes and other random muscle activities. My main activity is to direct my focus. While my body is playing I can shift my attention to different body parts, to the basic flavour of the movements in general to my sight. And I can consciously play with the rhythm of changing my focus and its openness or precision.

Similar to Nancy's underscore practice I can switch to previous phases, like different states of awareness or roles according to my actual needs.

Of course it is possible to not use the leading nor the active following role at all and to just stay in the state of listening and discover from there the opening of the joints. Maybe it is also a matter of personality.

### **The end of the small dance**

I might just create a clear moment to finish this practice. I open my eyes if they were closed and invite the surrounding into my world. I take a deep breath. And I step out: Either physically by making a step or by following the actual needs of my body like stretching or bouncing. Anyway, it has to be a mental shift out of this practise.

Very often I like to keep a kind of awareness and connectedness of this practise and use it for further investigations. Following the weight of the head forward to a hang over position is one of my favourite next fields of exploration, which includes a bigger range of physical movements in my spine. From there I often go into squatting or 4 footer positions (I refuse to call it a bench, it is a moving position!!) to continue my arrival into a jam-mind-set.

The other option I love is to connect breathing and arm movements. Legs and torso are so wonderfully aligned after a small dance practice that there seems to be no better support for arm explorations than this. I observe how turn in / turn out movements in the shoulder joints and the movements of my shoulder blades while lifting the arms interact with my breathing.

### **Other positions for small dance**

As mentioned above, the standing position is not the only option for the small dance and maybe not always the best one. In my experience it is rather challenging to get the lumbar and lower thoracic spine movable and softly responsive. The lower back can tighten pretty easily.

I discovered the 4 footer position (on hands and knees) as very suitable for the small dance. The weight of the pelvis is swimming on the balls of the thighbones. The balancing is concentrated on the hip joints without the knee joints and ankles. The spine can easier respond sideways to the movements of the pelvis than in standing. The snaky connectedness of the vertebrae is easier to sense. And like in standing position the weight needs to drop into the floor (through thighbones and arms) to receive the uprising energy, which supports the – now horizontal - extension of the spine.

The master ship might be to be able to sense the small dance in all positions that need a negotiation of bones, joints and gravity by balancing reflexes in each moment and through that also while moving, alone and with physical contact.

### **Continuous practice**

The continuous practice gives in two ways deeper delight to the small dance. The listening skills develop, so that the sensation becomes richer. And the joints become more open and more connected with each other, so that there is more to be sensed. At least in my practice it becomes more and more often a whole body experience.

On the other hand there is no real continuation. Every day and every time the body is different in its abilities and needs. Each time a slightly different approach and timing is required and the discoveries and the physical and mental restrictions and revelations will be others than the time before.