

# The Kinaesthetic Imagination

## *an interview with Joan Skinner*

by Bettina Neuhaus

**Joan Skinner**, former member of the Martha Graham and the Merce Cunningham Companies began experiments in 1963 that evolved into the **Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT)**.

*SRT is a pioneering approach to dance and movement training that facilitates a deep kinaesthetic experience of movement. Guided poetic imagery and hands-on partner studies stimulate the process of letting go of one's holding patterns and preconceptions, releasing new possibilities in how we perceive and how we move. An investigation of dynamic and multidirectional alignment leads one to discover more freedom, strength, effortlessness, and nuance in movement.*

*The poetic images, interwoven with specific music, touch the imagination, triggering spontaneous movement and transformative states of consciousness that reveal a primal grace. SRT is a self-propelling process that supports each individual's way of learning and enhances any activity and movement style. It is recognized as a significant way of engaging the whole self while integrating technical growth with creative process.*

*In June 2005, after a transformative four-year course of study with Joan, I conducted the following interview in the interest of introducing her thinking to a wide audience.*

**Bettina Neuhaus:** *Today you are known throughout the world as the creator of the Skinner Releasing Technique. What is your own history in the field of dance?*

**Joan Skinner:** I danced with the Martha Graham Company for three years. Then I happened to see a performance of Merce Cunningham, a piece called *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three*. I was absolutely enchanted. I had no idea what was going on because the structure of the piece was unlike anything—anything I had ever seen—since it was done by chance procedures. I just loved it. So I said, that's the way I want to dance. I left Graham with all her drama, melodrama, and psychological drama and went to study with Merce. And pretty soon I found myself dancing in *Sixteen Dances for Soloist and Company of Three*.

**Bettina:** *Looking back on your history, on the artistic and pedagogic work you have developed, who are the teachers, artists or other people you feel especially connected to today?*

**Joan:** One of the first influences was my childhood dance teacher Cora Belle Hunter, a student of Mabel Ellsworth Todd, author of *The Thinking Body*. Miss Hunter had a very organic approach to movement; she brought images for children to class and even had a skeleton in the classroom. I guess that it was her influence that prompted me later to question the techniques I was training in.

Then Merce Cunningham and John Cage had a huge influence on me when I was dancing with Merce. They introduced me to the notion of stillness and the writings of Suzuki about Zen and then there was their whole interesting chance procedure in which the ego steps aside. In this time I read Eugene Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, where he talked about "it" shooting—the arrow shoots; you don't shoot it.

The third big influence was the Alexander Technique. While dancing with Merce, I had a back injury and started to work with an Alexander teacher in NY. Its principles were again making sense because they were organic and that took me back to my childhood experience of moving. The main thing I got from the Alexander Technique was the notion that no one part of the body compresses against another part of the body, which I use in Releasing. Well, the Alexander Technique allowed my injury to heal and I was able to go back and dance, which I thought I was not going to be able to do anymore.

**Bettina:** *Where would you say your own work started?*

**Joan:** While I was dancing with Merce, I began to work alone at home. I set up a barre in my apartment and put mirrors on both sides of the room so that I could see myself from different angles. I was questioning particularly the techniques that at that time forced one part of the body against another. The words that you heard so often were “grip, hold on, and pull up.” I wondered how you could grip, hold on, and pull up and breathe the way I thought nature intended. So, I was searching for solutions that were more organic.

After I left NY with an infant son I began to work alone for three years. I took the Alexander principles where you don’t grip anywhere or hold on or pull up and attempted to apply them to a ballet-barre at home. I was trying to find that balance without gripping and began to work kinaesthetically. Gradually the barre itself broke down, and eventually I did find that kind of multidirectional balancing that we use in Releasing.

Then I started to teach traditional modern dance at a university. I wanted to share something of what I had learned and I searched for a way to convey some kinaesthetic information. In my own practice, while lying on the floor, images began to come that I could try on the students. The first image I gave them was a *marionette string at the top of the head*, from which they hung and were suspended. They took to it to my surprise. They would go across the floor doing their modern dance sequence with their strings, and would laugh and say, “I lost my string when I turned,” or “I lost my string when I went into the air.” They really were developing their self-awareness, their perceptual awareness on a kinaesthetic level. I was surprised about how much they took to it. So that gave me courage to try something more.

**Bettina:** *What is Skinner Releasing Technique?*

**Joan:** It’s complex; it has different dimensions and facets. It started out as a dance technique because I was a dancer and I was teaching dance students. I think it has grown to be much more than that—and that brings in the way I think about dance. I think of dance as much broader and deeper than professional dancer’s techniques. Human beings experience rhythmic movement in the womb, so we are born with an affinity for movement and a sense of rhythm. In my view we live our lives through the medium of movement, even in our sleep; the breathing moves, the heart beats, the blood circulates and the eyelids flutter.

I like to think of all movement as dance or it could become that, if human beings could experience moving with a kind of sense of harmony. And a common writing of students in SRT is something about “feeling a wholeness, feeling integrated, feeling at peace with myself.” A big part of the technique is getting in touch with hidden tension patterns and letting them go. We are opening up ourselves to merge

with energy that's all around us or with that life force that's within us. Releasing is a process, a very dynamic one.

**Bettina:** *The stimulation of our personal imagination and a sense of poetry seem to be the core of SRT.*

**Joan:** Absolutely—it wouldn't be what it is without the use of imagery. It's the core. When I was searching for ways to convey kinaesthetic information to these students I would lie on the floor, do my own practice, and images just came and came. These images are poetic, but I don't call them poems, I call them "image clusters."

The philosopher Suzanne Langer wrote about the image, and said it is "*a mental picture of something for our direct imaginative grasp.*" The language of images is vast if not vaster than the language of words. Plus, the image has a great capacity to communicate such nonverbal information as kinaesthetic data. And as the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assaggioli said, "*the image is perceived through the intuition rather than through the analytical mind.*" This is an important feature; with the intuition one absorbs the image and perceives it instantly in its totality.

In Releasing, the imagination and the physical self are totally integrated in movement. The physical self works kinaesthetically and the imagination is focusing on an image, which can be a metaphor for a technical principle. And because the imagery is poetic, it kindles the imagination of the individual and stimulates the student to move with that technical principle and his or her own imagination. Thus technique and creative process are integrated in this technique. The individual receives the image and the energy inside it, and then eventually one merges with an image and becomes transformed by it. This becomes another reality. It becomes so real that one can become the image.

**Bettina:** *Many images in SRT are related to nature. For example, there is an image in which the breath transforms into white mist and spirals throughout the limbs. What role does nature play in your approach?*

**Joan:** I always felt very close to nature as a child, and it was always very much part of my life. I am fascinated by the fact that everything in our environment is in motion and the movements are rhythmic, pertaining to their function rather than to time. You can think about the earth moving around the sun, the earth itself is spinning, and there are the tides, and night into day, the cycle of the moon, the seasons. I believe that human beings are part of nature and that's why I think nature images are so important in this technique.

**Bettina:** *Looking at the different images you use I find it surprising that they tend to be expressed briefly and in simple words but at the same time they open up the imagination so much.*

**Joan:** I always have loved poetry from childhood on. But when I went to graduate school I took a course in Japanese literature and I was introduced for the very first time to the Japanese haiku. That just struck me right away. I collected these different haikus—and there you have the brevity and the sort of reverberations that come from it. The haiku has been a huge influence on the shaping of my image clusters.

**Bettina:** *What is your purpose when you shape an image?*

**Joan:** There are different kinds of images. Some of them are very specific, like the marionette strings, and some are called “totalities,” like the “pool-totality” or the “rain-forest-totality.” At some point I felt the need to take the students away from themselves and to encourage some kind of loss of identity or disorientation. And that’s what the totalities do. They submerge the individual in something that’s larger than the individual, they provide that opportunity to give up one’s self-identity momentarily so that one can experience something other, and more, perhaps.

**Bettina:** *What are the main principles in SRT?*

**Joan:** There are so many—a major key is the principle of allowing, instead of controlling to make something happen. There is the principle that no one part of the physical self compresses against any other part or segment, which facilitates maximum freedom for movement. Further, the technique encourages the allowing for “it” to move rather than the self making the move. We cultivate autonomy of the skull, the arms, legs... and the breath. We focus on harmonious alignment that is always in flux and that includes the principle of multidirectional balance, as everything relates to and counterbalances everything else. Then economy is another principle where we cultivate that less is more, which has to do with effort—effortless effort.

**Bettina:** *In many dance techniques it seems like we’re learning new vocabulary, new capacities... How about SRT? Sometimes it feels like it is more about allowing an “old knowledge” to reappear?*

**Joan:** We talk about the technique “peeling away layers of programmed behavior and thought.” We tap into essences of who we really are. So, I do feel that we are tapping into a primal state of being that has always been there. But perhaps we just get disconnected from that due to the stresses in our life, especially the pressure of growing up, trying to please parents, please teachers, succeed, and compete. You call it “old knowledge”—I just call it a “primal state.”

**Bettina:** *What do you think a dance technique should give to a dancer today?*

**Joan:** I think, in general terms, freedom. I’m guessing that it would be a purpose of any technique to make it possible for the individual to be as expressive as that individual could be. And I think SRT does that. I like to think that this technique facilitates the learning of any mode of moving. It also frees the individual to realize their full potential for expressing whatever they want to express coming from their own imagination.

**Bettina:** *As a last thing—I’m always touched by the amount of curiosity, openness, and availability with which you engage with all the different people that come to your training; especially the young generation.*

**Joan:** I think what fascinates me is watching people in class—I love to see them peel away layers of prescribed behavior and prescribed thoughts to discover who they really are. And you see it when it happens. The people are discovering something. And they change. They look different; they have more strength, they have more serenity, and they just look different because they’re no longer programmed.

It's always awesome to me to see that in class. So, I am never tired of seeing people change.

Let me finish with a quote by Pamela May, a poet and one of our first trained teachers. She wrote about Releasing:

*I think about not doing anything extra.*

*I think it is about the art of letting go and not wasting time anticipating.*

*More it is surrender and directed willingness.*

*What can I say except that I am growing at the same rate that I am dissolving and I am nothing and I'm feeling my relationship to all things.*

*No lectures, just hanging over edges in the self and learning to fly.*

*Grace and strength, discipline and play and nothingness.*

—Pamela May

Published June 2010 in the online magazine of CONTACT QUARTERLY

<https://community.contactquarterly.com/journal/view/skinner>

A French version of this interview including further information about imagery work in general as well as drawings & writings from previous participants has been published December 2010 as part of the book 'De l'une à l'autre. Composer, apprendre et partager en mouvements', Contredanse, Bruxelles.

**Joan Skinner**, former member of the Martha Graham and the Merce Cunningham Companies, began experiments in 1963 that evolved into the Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT). She conducts workshops in the U.S. and has been artist-in-residence at performing arts schools and festivals in Amsterdam, Caracas, New Zealand, Australia, London, and the International Dance Festival ImpulsTanz in Vienna. [www.skinnerreleasingnetwork.org](http://www.skinnerreleasingnetwork.org)

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**Special thanks** to Hazel Carrie, Stephanie Skura, and Lisa Nelson for their thoughtful feedback and editing assistance. Thanks to Theresa Moriarty and Kristine Knutson for fine-tuning the text of the interview.