

Moving Meditations: embodying Bartenieff Fundamentals through sensorial awareness of breath, bones and gravity

Abstract

This article shares a somatic approach to the practice of meditation reflecting on experiences of facilitating meditation classes for others as well as my own personal practice. I share my application of Bartenieff Fundamentals as a framework for meditation, outlining the language of the body it offers for imagery-based guided meditation – a process of embodied fundamentals. Through exploring the relationship between my practice of Bartenieff Fundamentals and a somatic approach to being in the world, I question how Bartenieff's Principle of Breath Support may guide a practice of meditation and how in this process of embodiment we might shade, tone, and strengthen meditation as a process of somatic engagement, revealing a dialogic relationship between form and fluidity, somatic moving and spiritual connectivity. The use of the voice, heightened sensorial awareness through imagery of breath, bone, and gravity are considered through this practice of guided meditations: an embodying of body-space-environment as a transactional space of self-care. Presented through different modalities of formal text, notes from practice, movement scores and images, I invite readers to engage with this work through reading, moving and meditating.

Key words

Embodiment, meditation, breath, self-care, somatic, sensorial, transaction, body-space-environment

Introduction

Moving Meditations has evolved through my somatic moving and dancing practice of *embodied fundamentals* - a process of embodying the principles of Bartenieff Fundamentals through improvised movement exploration. This practice of Embodied Fundamentals emerged through my doctoral studies 2014-21 and offers a framework for exploring somatic moving and dancing. In this article I outline my recent application of this practice as an approach to meditation. I position my own approach to somatic enquiry within the context of Bartenieff Fundamentals by beginning with a brief overview of this practice from its established form (recognising it is not possible to delve into an analysis of the complexity of the practice in depth in the scope of this article). I move on to share the framework I have developed for embodied fundamentals and discuss this within the context of sharing verbally guided meditations with others – a practice of Moving Meditations. Through my writing I observe the relationships between form and fluidity, physicality and spirituality and the importance of human connection through this practice. I offer some of the movement scores that have emerged from these meditations within this article. The scores illuminate further the sensorial experiences of the meditations and offer an invitation to engage with improvised exploration; places to pause, come away from the page and breathe into the flesh of your own body. Some reflections from students that have been participating in Moving Meditations with me over the past year are integrated through the text as I make space for further sharing, reflection, and exchange in our embodied experiences.

Bartenieff Fundamentals

Bartenieff Fundamentals, an integrative system of movement patterning developed in the 1960s by dance artist and physical therapist Irmgard Bartenieff in response to her work with Rudolf Laban,¹ consists of a set of Principles and Fundamentals and as such it provides a framework and a language relative to the moving body. The Fundamentals offer distinct patterns of organisation of the Body, while the Principles present wider conceptual themes related to Effort.² My interpretation of Bartenieff's philosophy of moving is through the relational aspects of body-space-environment, which are implicit in the way in which

¹ Bartenieff Fundamentals grew from the development of the Body aspect of Laban's conceptual framework for human movement (LMA) consisting of Body-Effort-Shape-Space (Fernandes, 2015) See also Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies as the home of the practices in direct relationship in New York. <https://labaninstitute.org/>

² LMA established concepts of Body-Effort-Shape-Space relate to Bartenieff's forming of the Principles and Fundamentals of BF through the Body concept of LMA

Bartenieff encapsulates our ability of efficiently ‘being in the world’ (Bartenieff and Lewis, 1980, Hackney, 2002, Fernandes, 2012) but not always made explicit in practice or scholarship. My interest in working developmentally with Bartenieff Fundamentals in contexts of movement and meditation lies within the fundamental philosophical aspect of Bartenieff’s work that views the body in relationship with its environment and sees change as fundamental to this (life) practice (Bartenieff and Lewis, 1980, Hackney, 2002).

I encounter Bartenieff Fundamentals as a somatic approach which critically engages with the body in motion rather than a definitive technique of movement per se. My own approach to improvising with the Fundamentals began when I utilised the practice to create a framework for teaching release-based technique to undergraduate students around fifteen years ago. Bartenieff Fundamentals offered me a ‘technique’³ for this often root-less, ambiguous method of post-modern dance.⁴ Following practitioner-scholar Martha Eddy’s work in positioning somatic practices in scholarship,⁵ I locate the key characteristics of somatic practice as; the focus on deepened listening to the body from internal sensations, bodily awareness, and centring the breath as core to developmental processes of exploration. Acknowledging Bartenieff Fundamentals as a somatic practice therefore recognises the qualities and approach it shares as a movement system within this wider lineage of practice. My approach to the Fundamentals and my own resulting practice of embodied fundamentals is integrative of mind, body and spirit in its philosophy, offering practical visualizations of internal bodily maps, and connectivity of the body in(to) motion through the awareness of the breath and environment. This promotes a learning of self through heightened awareness and sensitivity to bodily sensations through specific movement patterns of connectivity with a goal of promoting balance, ease, and efficiency in movement, and therefore in one’s sense of being in the world. In the often chaotic and fast-paced times we live through this practice feels increasingly important in the ability to offer people a method of (re)connecting with the body, letting go of habitual patterns of tension, mis-alignment and dis-ease, prevalent as a result of simply surviving in modern society.

³ Technique as it is discussed by Erin Manning is a relational activity between dancer, time-space, and ground. Manning proposes a triad of dancer-movement-ground and suggests that grounding is key to technique in the dancer experiencing the dance in shifting relationships with gravity (Manning, 2012: 70-71).

⁴ Release-based techniques while aligned in overarching aims to train the body to move with ease and efficiency minimising unnecessary strain and tension as the body works with weight flow and momentum with not against gravity, are largely defined by the individual practitioner. See also, Daniel Lepkoff, (1999), ‘What is Release Technique’, *Movement Research Performance Journal*, vol.19

⁵ Martha Eddy reflects on her own experiences and commentary on the eclectic field of somatic movement studies and dance, *Brief History of Somatic Practice and Dance* (2009) and later publication *Mindful Movement* (2016), identify distinct practices within, and overview developments in somatic-based work. Eddy’s own journey in a range of ‘bodywork’ practices is noted as she emphasizes the importance of learning from people as much the techniques themselves. Eddy presents this varied education in somatic practice through what she has drawn as approaches to mindfulness, which centre around interpretations of *the soma*.

My application of Bartenieff's work as a meditation practice develops an alternative, generative approach to working with the Fundamentals in contexts of somatic moving and spirituality. I use the language of Bartenieff Fundamentals as an invitation for investigations of bodily-spatial experiences, both physically and metaphorically through improvised movement. Embodied fundamentals explores this further through stimulating guided adventures of the breath through the body in a relational flow with the environment. This offers an interpretation of somatic practice which is not specific only to the body, but rather it speaks inherently to the ways in which the body is immediately of its environment, rich in emotional, sensorial spiritual potential and significantly in community with others.

[breath support]

eyes closed

breathe...

filling

emptying

rising to fall

what do you notice?

whispering...touching...listening

the rhythm of the breath fills the body,

sinuous as it passes

change

space...skin touching the earth, speaking to it, taking from it...

listening

inner to outer

outer to inner

letting in

letting go

rocking

falling to grow...

Moving Meditations

My approach to mediation as a somatic practice encourages the improvisational possibilities within Bartenieff Fundamentals, illuminated through my own framework of embodied fundamentals, and a re-consideration of the form of the practice through a process of somatic enquiry. This renewed approach through meditation is evident through the language and methods I use to expand the possibility of transactions within and beyond the body. In *Moving Mediations*, elements of Bartenieff Fundamentals – Principles and Body Patterns, are considered in constant constellations of movement, through the breath and bones of our being. Through gentle improvised explorations I invite a journey of attending to the sound, space and the rhythms of our environment in motion.

My practice of meditation as a somatic experience fundamentally begins with a focus on the breath as the primary movement through which the body is mapped in an on-going process. Mapping the body through a process of deepened listening and internal visualisation of the breath moving through the body, allows for tuning and attending to the body's sensations on a micro level (self-scanning of the body) while establishing a sense of the connected whole on a macro-level (body in relationship with environment). Attending to internalised sensations of the body, expanding to, and receiving information from an outer environment is common in many somatic practices, Body Mind Centring, The Feldenkrais Method, Skinner Releasing Technique (Eddy, 2009), Shin Somatics, Contact Unwinding (Fraleigh, 2015) and has been termed by Bartenieff as 'inner connectivity and outer expressivity' (cited in Hackney, 2002: 34). For Bartenieff an experiential understanding of inner and outer and the relational possibility between them is key to the pursuit of humans being in the world; functioning, expressive and efficient in movement (Bartenieff and Lewis, 1980).

Breath in my practice of meditation is the route into the connectivity between inner and outer. Embodying internal visualizations of the breath in my body, locating it spatially and temporally I draw on Bartenieff's principle of breath support through cellular breathing— noticing the process of continually filling and emptying with the breath, an inner experience of growing and shrinking, an exchange with the environment outside of ourselves (Bartenieff, 1980, Hackney, 2002). Peggy Hackney proposes that 'the fuller our respiration, the more each and every cell of our bodies is dialoguing with the world' (2002: 61). I close my eyes and attend to the cyclical pattern of breath in my belly, rising and falling, filling and

emptying. An internalized focus on the breath is key to experiencing patterns of inner connectivity and outer expressivity, as the practice encourages one to attend to the inner rhythms of the breath and to notice the body's shape changing through inhalation and exhalation, expanding, and condensing as it gathers oxygen and releases carbon dioxide in an on-going exchange with the environment. For Bartenieff's goal of total integration of mind and body in movement this preparatory phase of the breath offers a coming together of cerebral, sensorial, physical, spiritual, emotional awareness with and of ones' environment.

In my own practice, I guide the breath into movement through increasingly expansive imagery which takes influence from the internal sensations of my own body as well as the environment I am moving in. I pose questions of my body as it moves, questioning how I experience being in relation to sensations of head-tail connectivity, grounding, stability-mobility, exertion-recuperation within and of the environment. I experience a journey in motion through attending to the breath that takes in combinations of principles and patterns through multiple pairings as a response to, and an expression of the environment as a whole.

i begin sitting or supine on the floor, energizing through the body's connection to the support of the earth beneath me i begin to visualize the breath in my core (belly), i map my body following the breath checking-in and acknowledging the internal landscape and sensations of my body that day, moving with breath supporting my investigation i begin to encourage rocking, loosening the musculature of my body at the same time agitating my skeletal mass, waves passing through my spine, moving sequentially through the body patterns i begin inviting my responses in movement to core-distal opening and closing, head-tail mobilizations of my spine, i build through patterns of upper-lower in relationship with yield and push beginning to empower the body in its resistance of gravity to progress to standing, where body-half patterns meet in conversation with principles of stability-mobility and pelvic shifts as i become excited by the possibilities of weight shifting, falling through space. i am integrated, whole, body-space-environment in motion.

(notes from practice, 2019)

Taking a transactional approach to working with somatic practice in a way that is explicitly relational of bodily-spatial possibilities, I encourage a focus on the body which *is* the activity of its environment.⁶ I do this through (re)articulating the established form of somatic practice in relationship with expanded imagery and influences from the ‘external’ environment. Encouraging moving through meditations with imagery and sensations of the environment, I acknowledge the ways in which the environment (social-cultural-physical-ecological) shapes and is shaped by our movement responses. This practice thus explores ways in which ‘the body’ may be understood and valued as contributory rather than merely receptive-responsive to environments. In this approach the body is co-constructive of its own identity as it is the environment which it creates and inhabits simultaneously. Guided improvised explorations rich in imagery of breath, bones and environment thus nurture the potential between systematic approaches to the moving body in its environment with a more fluid, participatory generative approach to the body *as* environment. Through verbally guided imagery and written movement scores, I offer invitations to the rich potentiality of the body which recognizes its social-cultural-physical-emotional-sensorial being embraced *as* the somatic experience. The potential agency of the body in this practice of meditation is thus within the relationships that are nourished through this approach to somatic practice within sensorial experience.

images of the waves in the ocean crashing and rolling over us or quietly lapping as we lie at the shoreline – I move much more freely and joyfully, unlimited by my conscious, thinking mind and liberated by the creativity of the images – movement seems to flow from me like a bursting source, unbounded, expansive and joyous.

In those moments, I feel liquid myself – it feels as if every muscle fibre and neuron is connected.

(reflections from Moving Meditations participant: 2021)

⁶ I draw on Shannon Sullivan’s articulation of ‘the transactional female body as fully discursive’, Sullivan, S. (2001). *Living across and through skins : transactional bodies, pragmatism and feminism*.

[Figure 1: insert image]

[a transaction between inner and outer]

let the breath come to a sense
a space-location in the body
becoming aware of sensation

let the breath inform the structure of the body
feel its shifts
meet neighbouring body parts

begin to sense how you might feel into each part of the body internally,
sensing and mapping the breath

beginning to visualise the breath
let it find a spatial orientation in the body

sensing where you feel the breath
as you begin to locate it

tuning in(to) a sense of space
of breath

imagining the space-time
the breath takes to fill and empty
through the space of the breath

beginning to sense the space of the body
beginning to tune in
to the possibility of the breath as you feel it
three-dimensionally in the body

moving into a conversation
where the inner space of the body
meets with the space it is moving in

a transaction between inner and outer
finding moments to really be in those in-between spaces

the spaces between clear reference points

The process of transaction between inner and outer within my own daily practice begins from an engagement with internal attention and a quietening of external distraction. This might be thought of as ‘a preparatory practice’ (Nelson, L. 2006), which is recognized in different ways through most somatic practice and spoken about widely through somatic scholarship (Fraleigh, 2015, 2018, Eddy, 2009, 2011, Garrett Brown, 2012, Kampe, 2013, Tufnell, 2004, Nelson, L. 2006, 2014). For improviser Lisa Nelson it forms something of a ‘pre-technique’.

I arrive behind my eyes ...
I hear myself inhale, feel the cells of my body expand into the stillness.
I am absorbed by the invitation of time.
Or I am absorbed in the sensuality of my floating attention.
(Nelson, L. 2014)

As a preparatory process, ‘heightening sensorial awareness’ offers a deep level of listening through the senses which is enhanced by way of a process that minimizes physical activity; the eyes are closed, and the body is attuned to the rhythm of the breath and the external environment. I visualize my breath from within, attending to its pulse, rhythm, depth, and location. I tune into the qualities I feel from the breath, sometimes flowing through my body, sometimes deep and heavy, noting blockages, holding of tension as I connect through this inner awareness of breath, a template for inner connectivity. I interpret Bartenieff’s Principle of *breath support* through processes of cellular breathing as a cyclical nourishing of the body. Attending to the breath is my route into a heightened sense of awareness of my bodily sensations in relation with my environment.

In practice these explorations expand through a progressive physicalising of mapping the body using imagery that encourages moving into bodily responses of the patterns and pathways of the breath in relation with an expanding sense of the body’s shaping of, and being shaped by, its environment. Facilitating meditation through this approach offers a conceptual framework for the environment of the class. I use it to create an arc from inner bodily attention at the start of the class to the expressivity of more complex layers of movement patterning, emotion, and spirituality. The body in motion through these patterns begins a bodily-spatial relationship between inner and outer and it is shaped and (re)shaped, by inner impulses to move with, and of the outer environment.

Closing the eyes and attending to the internal sensations of the breath we begin together a process of losing the overly dominant visual sense and indulge a renewed interest in the world ‘behind my eyes’ (Myss, 1996:13). Caroline Myss speaks of this as a place of inner guidance within our bodies as she recounts narratives of intuitive bodies, spiritually connecting...being. Utilizing methods of heightening sensorial awareness through working without sight encourages a deepened possibility for experiencing internal attention to Self when de-familiarized from the outer visual environment. The restriction of typical sensory perception encourages alternative routes into, and relationships between breath, movement, and the environment of improvised explorations. This feels a critical place to begin a meditation practice and I am interested in the potential of the meeting place between intuition and adventure. I am aware in this invitation to others that there is a degree of trust and openness in entering this process. The eyes are closed. Vulnerability is present. There is a disruption of our familiar process of locating self-in-space.

[(un)familiarity]

no sight, eyes closed
feeling
listening

follow an impulse

somewhere my body is speaking
respond to its voice..

the conversation begins

one voice, one movement, one gesture
never complete
offering a starting point
only

what is an offering?
what is a response-to-offer?

how do i relate to space?
what is the relationship through my moving body?

breath, flesh
sensing, touching

gravity

sense the light
the air
the temperature within
within *the* space, within *my* space

my body

breath
to stabilize, to ground
to secure...[momentarily]
somewhere between the excitement of shifting
moving, melting
off-balance
losing centre
again

a process
of body and environment
self and other

Moving Together

This practice nurtures an ability to be vulnerable, to be in-process, to listen both internally and externally. Guiding with my voice, I offer invitations to others into the space of our own bodies and encourage time to listen to the space of the body-self acknowledging all that is present in the relational flow between mind-body-spirit. I invite that we bring the mind into the body through the breath, encouraging a focus on visualising the breath, feeling it both spatially and temporally as an integrated experience of movement within the body. Working with eyes closed throughout, we listen. Tuning into the sensations, warmth, depth, duration, texture and tone of our breathing. With the eyes closed, we inhabit the internal body-mind, the breath is activated as the spirit of our being. Rich in many tones, and colours, rhythms and relationships. It is the spirit of our Self, the possibility of adventure, of being in the world.

Observing the shifts in my own practice as I move from the constructs of the dance studio to more fluid, caring, spiritual spaces of self-care through somatic moving, I am aware of the conversations I am having with other movement practitioners, students, ex-students, friends all trying to feel a sense of connectedness, to our own bodies, to each other, in this world, in change. I offer my practice of mediation as a movement process for others, a place of (re)connecting with self and other. This feels valuable in a world that increasingly emphasises (dis)location of mind and body, self and environment.

Moving with my mind, body, soul. It is a spiritual movement practice.

*Nourishing, replenishing, deeply, caring.
Bubbling image, tapping holes in body – awareness and presence of the body so deep, profound strong, strongly present!*

Vivid, whole, full.

(reflections from Moving Meditations participant: 2021)

[Figure 2: insert image]

[moving - being - together]

begin a new beginning
notice
the physical structures
the architecture
of the space
smell the warmth

begin a process of settling
let the weight
your body
pour slowly into a surface
close your eyes
imagine the surface
softening with
weight of your bones
just rest a while here

begin to breathe
let your mind
tune to the sensation of
the breath
listen
to your breath
as an ebb and flow
of water
let waves wash
through your body
energising
riding the wave of each in-breath

letting go

releasing back
into the ocean
every out breath
visualise the waves opening
through many smaller tributaries

reaching
your distal patterns
trickling
back
into your core

re) imagine the possible
journeys

As we deepen our listening to the breath collectively engaging in this space-time together, I begin to guide a journey slowly through the spine. I evoke imagery of the breath meeting and dancing in the spaces between the bones, of the breath imagining the vertebrae softening, swimming between the head and the tail. The invitation to others is to move into the sensations that these images evoke, moving as much or as little as they feel and recognising that the movement of the breath alone can be enough. This is a deliciously slow journey. We take time to dwell in the lumbar spine, observing, noticing, warming the bones with the breath. We create space for exploration through the thoracic spine, enjoying the possibility of spiralling intent and invite a beautiful playfulness as we meet the ribs. We attend to the cervical spine, noticing a sensitivity here as we move into mobilising the skull and inviting transaction with the environment around us through the porosity of the skin.

The unique combination of meditatively focusing on the breath, visualising this breath in the body and then expanding that into natural movement is soothing and healing. There is a clear somatic practice in the classes, as we are guided through the body, visualising the breath and the structures inside our bodies – I remember focusing on our ribcage and embracing all the textures, tissues, shape and functions this has. It was a different way of relating to my body, a detailed exploration of the movement possibilities of this distinct part of me.

(reflections from Moving Meditations participant: 2021)

Through this meditation practice we begin noticing the breath, bones and our relationship with gravity, the contact of the skin with the earth surface, taking adventures through the spine, enlivening the spaces between the bones, navigating our skeletal architecture, taking pleasure in the sensuous, richness, the expanse of the heart, the lungs, the mouth, before settling a journey of pouring weight, melting bones, breath deepening our relationship with gravity, with the earth. As I guide the movement of the breath sequentially through the body the connectivity of the breath and bones with gravity brings us toward a deepened relationship of the body *as* earth, growing into and with, nourishing and being nourished.

[spaces of (and) beyond your spine]

pouring the breath

between
the top of the head and the base of the tail

let the waves ripple through the spine
noticing the space they flow freely through

build a map of your head-tail

begin to move into the physicality of the flow

enjoy this spinal activity
a mapping of your environment
through head-tail patterning

make space for the weight of the spine
pouring into the pelvis
tipping into and over the skull

visualise

mobilization of the lower body
in relationship
with the upper body

beginning to find stability
in the lower body
grounding

yielding to push
pushing to reach...to grow

outwardly from your core
reaching into your environment

begin to taste the space beyond your skin
pouring weight
let the waves ripple between body-halves
left-right
cross-laterally

pouring weight - sustaining - letting go
pouring weight - sustaining - letting go

notice patterns

notice change

We melt. Gradually releasing, yielding in relationship with gravity, experiencing the tone of the body's surface in relationship with, and into the earth. We experience the body *as* environment. We close together, supine, supported by the earth, our limbs spreading like rhizomatic roots into the earth, reaching out, connecting with each other, through space-time, a global community in this practice. We take time to honour the space of this community, the networks of support around us, moving, meditating, being ...together. Moving meditations as an embodied practice offers a way to see a relationship between the somatic and the spiritual as the possibility to 'enter into communication across and through the skin of the material body to the wider human lived-experience' (Akinleye and Kindred, 2020), to express the body, as an integrated, transactional, fluid being through expanded approaches of somatic enquiry. Through this approach I offer alternative possibilities and responses to somatic practice and encourage an expansion of it through an empowering spiritual lens.

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