

## MASTER OF ARTS BY RESEARCH

### Skinner releasing technique and the autonomic nervous system

### initial discoveries on processes of nurturing embodied experiences of safety and freedom

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**Skinner Releasing Technique and the Autonomic Nervous System:  
Initial discoveries on processes of nurturing embodied experiences of safety and  
freedom**

**Lizzy Le Quesne**

***A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University's requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Research***

**July 2020**



## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Lizzy Le Quesne

Project Title:

Safety and Freedom: Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) and the activation and utilisation of kinaesthetic experience to shift and enliven embodied structures of being. (working title)

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Low Risk

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08 June 2020

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This thesis is dedicated both to Joan Skinner and to my dear mother, Mary Le Quesne. These two women - inspirational in their sensitivity and faith in human nature, extended through poetic expression - have both sadly passed away within weeks of one another between first submission of this thesis and its final version.

## **Abstract**

This study explores the relationship between creative somatic dance practice Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) and the human autonomic nervous system (ANS). Specifically this thesis considers how SRT, through supporting optimal function of the ANS, is able to engender embodied experiences of safety and freedom. It develops an understanding of the ways in which SRT frames a practical process based in astute “kinaesthetic awareness” (Skinner 2006) and somatic movement exploration that is able to access and stimulate the ANS, supporting states that engender profound and creative qualities of embodied safety and freedom in dance and in life.

SRT, created by US dancer Joan Skinner in the 1960s, combines poetic imagery, touch, sound and somatic awareness to explore specific technical principles of dance and movement such as “softening”, “multi-directional alignment” and “buoyancy”. These are explored through improvisational movement and immersive visualisations in varying states of consciousness, and frame a delicately transformational process of personal unfolding within the “physical self” (Skinner 2006). Steven Porges’ polyvagal theory outlines the structure, function and behaviour of the ANS in its constant “quest for safety” (2017:xv); and reveals how the capacity to establish an embodied sense of safety underlies human emotional, mental and behavioural wellness. The thesis analyses practices and processes of SRT in relation to Steven Porges’ polyvagal theory of ANS function.

Drawing on Porges and on the work of practitioners who have developed methods to apply polyvagal theory in therapeutic practice – principally clinical psychotherapist Deb Dana and bodywork healer Stanley Rosenberg - the thesis proposes an understanding of how SRT supports sophisticated function of the ANS and in particular the ventral vagal nerve, the “vagal brake” and Porges’ “social engagement system” (Porges 2011:120-121) - through its detailed, sensorial and compassionate approach to “letting go” (Skinner 2006) of habitual holding patterns within the body. I also draw on the work of embodied trauma specialist Peter Levine to explore processes of releasing trapped energy in the body. The study explores how the multi-layered combination of somatic and imaginative processes, delicately intertwined within SRT, is particularly well positioned to address the ANS which itself functions through highly sensitive yet unconscious, physiological processes. I develop a theory that SRT, embracing multiple levels of embodied consciousness and encapsulating these in easily learnable and accessible “dances” or “movement studies” (Skinner 2006) which embody “hybrid autonomic states” (Porges 2011:35-36), is particularly able to practise and maintain over time improved ANS function. I argue that SRT is thus able to support regulated qualities of mobilization and

immobilization that underwrite wellbeing, dance performance and expression, and embodied emancipation.

The research combines theoretical study of polyvagal theory, the work of Dana, Rosenberg, and Levine, applied to reflection on the author's embodied experience as a professional somatic dance artist and teacher of SRT. Polyvagal theory and the author's reflections on practice are explored with reference to Joan Skinner's currently unpublished 'Underlying Principles of the Skinner Releasing Technique' (Skinner 2010) and class transcripts (Skinner 2011).

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## Introduction

It is my enduring personal experience, as a dancer and as a teacher, that the somatic dance technique 'Skinner Releasing Technique' (SRT) reaches into, welcomes and engages multiple and many-layered aspects of the feeling, sensing, imaginative and energetic self; and that it is able to produce profound embodied experiences of safety and of freedom. This project begins to investigate how that may be so.

It originated some years ago in a powerful hunch that there is an important relationship between SRT and the human autonomic nervous system (ANS) – the part of the nervous system which governs unconscious processes of homeostatic regulation and is fundamentally responsible for recognising conditions and establishing feelings of safety. The aims of this project then are to explore and establish how SRT is able to cultivate experiences of safety and freedom, and specifically, how it does this through accessing and supporting optimal function of the ANS. The thesis initially explores how a viable connection can be traced between SRT and the ANS; and then develops the ideas to identify and analyse an argument of how SRT's specific practices and principles of creative somatic dance can be understood to access and support ANS function and thus facilitate embodied states of wellbeing. I propose that SRT effectively recruits Porges' "unacknowledged intelligence of the nervous system" (Porges, in Dana 2018:xvi) towards palpable experiences of safety and of freedom, and that this is experienced as genuinely empowering.

Researching and analysing a relationship between SRT and the life and workings of the ANS, this project makes an original contribution to the existing discourse on SRT. SRT practitioner, Pilates and Gyrotonic instructor Aud Aasbo writes of SRT on her website that "the poetic images used in class affect the unconscious part of the nervous system, creating deep changes in the physical self" (Aasbo n.d.). Beyond this sentence, I am not aware of a connection between SRT and the ANS having been identified or analysed. Using polyvagal theory, this research then draws out new understanding of SRT's practices in terms of access and recruitment of the ANS and thus its potential to facilitate creative dance as well as how we may best inhabit ourselves to support quality of life in a broader sense. I argue that SRT is a practice of accessing, stimulating and optimising function of the nervous system, and thus of supporting human wellbeing and creative expression. I also propose that SRT's somatic dance process can enrich and inform scientific understanding in terms of how much capacity we have to engage, enliven and enrich our autonomic processes through somatic dance practice.

Aligning with Porges' faith in the nervous system's natural perception and autonomy, an 'Underlying Principle' of SRT asserts that "The physical self has intelligence – even in the cells" (Skinner 2010). SRT process foregrounds and develops highly sensitive "kinaesthetic awareness"<sup>1</sup> (Skinner 2006) engaged in free creative play, in order to support a number of technical principles towards the embodiment of "a natural, primal grace" (Skinner 2010). SRT frames a radically gentle and permissive experience of dance. It does not teach set movements or a particular movement style but frames a series of exploratory practices and philosophical principles based on encouraging a transformative process in the way that we inhabit our bodies, move and relate to the world. A primary process of the technique is the releasing of bodily tension and unconscious habitual patterns of holding in order to embody new experiences and qualities of spaciousness, ease and freedom of movement. "The nature of (Skinner) Releasing is change" (Davidson 1979:1).

Safety and freedom are fundamentally related to levels of perceived threat. Steven Porges' polyvagal theory (2011) underpins current understanding of the structure and function of the human autonomic nervous system and its fundamental role in our ability to feel safe. It has recently been adopted by a new generation of body focussed therapists and psychotherapists to support embodied routes to wellness, particularly in the rapidly growing field of trauma which is understood to fundamentally disrupt our capacity to feel safe and thus to engage effectively with life. This study draws predominantly on polyvagal theory, and on the work of therapists who interpret and apply it in therapeutic practice. I explore significant strands and concepts within polyvagal theory in relation to practices and principles of SRT, in order to unravel how SRT is able to access the ANS and support deeply embodied experiences of safety and freedom. There is a natural correlation between SRT's notion of supporting the process of change through releasing embodied holding patterns, and polyvagal theory's concept of the physiological and behavioural patterning formed by the neurophysiology of feeling safe or unsafe.

As a somatic dancer, I understand and am here referring to safety and freedom as deeply intertwined concepts that have palpable embodied qualities, which I sense when practising SRT, and witness in my SRT students. I understand a meaningful experience of embodied freedom as a sense of having the confidence and the ability to move and to act without internal

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<sup>1</sup> "Kinaesthetic awareness" is Skinner's deliberately all-embracing term for somatic perception of felt states of being. Contemporary somatic discourse also uses the terms felt sense, interoception, proprioception, viscerosensation, graviception and more. Kinaesthetic awareness embraces all of these, and conforms to the tendency throughout SRT of delicately avoiding anatomical precision or instruction, in order to facilitate a fresh, spontaneous and unanticipated experience of "the physical self" (2006).

resistance. This is a state that becomes real when there is a pre-existing quality of safety. When one does not feel safe, there is a sense of restriction or constraint at an embodied or emotional level which, although it may be in reality possible to over-ride in movement, does not look or feel like freedom. These states then are deeply connected and, I know experientially, are at this intimate level effectively serviced by SRT process. In this study I am exploring how the ANS plays into that process and how SRT accesses and plays into the ANS. PART ONE of the thesis outlines the practical ways in which SRT can be understood to access and recruit the ANS and navigate the three fundamental physiological states of being which the ANS supports. PART TWO develops the theory to propose that SRT is able to put this to powerful creative and expressive use, and to maximise the potential freedoms that polyvagal theory reveals within ANS function.

PART ONE begins with the proposal that Porges' phylogenetic "hierarchy" of three basic "autonomic states" (Porges 2011:54) is intuitively embodied within SRT's practices. This is considered in relation to the fundamental SRT imagery of "sponginess" (Skinner 2006). I explore ways in which SRT can be understood to cultivate and support the most optimal non-defensive autonomic state through stimulation of the specific sub-circuit of nerves and muscles that make up polyvagal theory's "social engagement system" (Porges 2011:125-6) and demonstrate ways in which SRT supports "vagal tone" (Porges 2011:144-5) through its unusual attention to face and voice; delicate support of skull and neck alignment; and breath. Informed by the work of bodyworker Stanley Rosenberg, I am also able to raise areas where such interventions might be strengthened within SRT.

I then consider how the act of dancing with and around these and other interventions can offer particularly creative processes of reaching into and exploring the positive functions within autonomic states. Through the work of psychotherapist Deb Dana I reveal ways in which SRT enacts and enables essential processes of transitioning between autonomic states - "moving up the autonomic ladder" (Dana 2018:10-13) - through Porges' hierarchy, to the optimal ventral state and a feeling of safety.

In PART TWO I explore how SRT can be understood to support creative freedoms through ANS function beyond the basic hierarchy of primary autonomic states. In this section, polyvagal theory's concept of "hybrid states" - "mobilization without fear" and "immobilization without fear" (Porges 2011:178) - becomes pivotal, and I propose that SRT is uniquely well placed to practise and enrich the hybrid autonomic states, develop skills in application of the "vagal brake" (Porges 2011:142-3) and thus to nurture human experiences of both safety and freedom. The hybrid states become an example of sophisticated human ANS function, and

SRT becomes the bearer of vital embodied creative expressions of and through this. I put forward two fundamental SRT “movement studies” - “the melting dance” and “the watchful state” (Skinner 2006) – as coherent instances of hybrid states; and reveal how these lie beneath and at the heart of all that we practise in SRT.

I expand the concept of hybrid state towards the complex interactions represented by the notion of “autonomic space” (Bernston et al. 1991:459), drawing a parallel between this and Skinner’s Underlying Principle “web-like” and the consistent evocation of a network of interconnected interior spaces that “move us” and “move with us” (Skinner 2010). Finally, I build upon my argument to develop the notion that SRT supports us and the ANS through an alert experience of interpersonal space. I propose that SRT implicitly understands the power of interpersonal space, and consider how it occurs in SRT in relation to Porges’ notions of “neuroception” (Porges 2011:193-4) and “co-regulation” (Porges 2011:48-51). I draw a parallel between the possibility that polyvagal theory offers in terms of helping people learn to address and mitigate ANS disfunction - in order to better self-regulate, manage their emotions, connect with others and fulfil their potential in the world - with the fundamental process of SRT to support us to more deeply and securely inhabit our bodies in order to more efficiently and productively become present, spontaneous and creative forces in the shared spaces either of dance performance or in the world. I demonstrate how SRT process is able to recruit resources within the ANS and especially within the hybrid states, to embody creative, interactive, responsive states of being, not simply defensive and protective but supporting qualities of safety that are already moving into meaningful conditions and expressions of freedom.

I did not encounter Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) until after I had trained<sup>2</sup> and subsequently worked for a decade as a professional dancer and choreographer. When I came across SRT by chance, in the course of my ongoing professional practice and deepening engagement with a range of somatic processes, it stunned me with its gentleness and depth. It very quickly took root in my body and in my life, offering astonishing succour, support, energy and inspiration, on more levels than I understood. It allowed me both to retreat - further into deep, private embodied experience and rest; and to emerge - more simply and fully into spontaneous presence, find new desire and energy to move. I have come, gradually, to understand that SRT values, speaks to, softens and enlivens the “physical self” (Skinner 2006) in deep and transformative ways, nurturing not only movement possibilities and creative emergence but also encouraging personal wellbeing and aliveness in subtle and effective ways.

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<sup>2</sup> first in classical ballet, then in visual art and contemporary dance and several somatic practices

My own experience of SRT as supportive, disarming and empowering has been upheld through observation of my students<sup>3</sup> both within and beyond the dance profession. There are certain comments that I repeatedly hear from students: about the space and time they are given in SRT class to sense and assimilate states of being; the gentleness of the atmosphere within the group; the lightness and ease that they feel within their bodies; the vivid sensorial and visual experiences they have had; the deepening shifts they feel in their ways of being; the joy of moving freely; as well as the surprising depth of emotions that sometimes surface for them. Again and again they assure me of the importance of the technique within their lives. Increasingly my classes have also attracted and embraced non-professional dancers, non-dancers, other artists and non-artists, and people living with or recovering from long term physical and mental health conditions; and I have been inspired to investigate, to better understand, to highlight and hopefully to strengthen these potentialities of the work. This is looking to be of value then to dancers – fostering deeply embodied presence and expressiveness – as well as to anyone who is drawn towards movement and interested in the processes of becoming more fully and comfortably embodied and alive.

In this study I extensively quote from the transcripts of Joan Skinner's 15 classes of the Introductory Series (2006) and the 'Underlying Principles of the Skinner Releasing Technique' (2010). Made available to trainees within the teacher certification programme, both these documents are currently unpublished; hence they are referenced throughout this thesis by year only and without page numbers. Specific technical terms from both SRT and polyvagal theory are explained in the following Background section and italicised throughout the text in order to assist the reader.

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<sup>3</sup> since my teacher certification in 2011

## **Background to the Fields of Study**

This section provides background information, essential theory, practices and terminology of SRT and polyvagal theory. I also provide brief introductions to additional practices and theories which have informed the research: Deb Dana's psychotherapeutic practice; Stanley Rosenberg's somatic bodywork; Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing; Amanda Williamson's Somatic Dance Movement Naturotherapy; and Eric Fromm's "Fear of Freedom".

### **Skinner Releasing Technique**

SRT is a holistic, somatic approach to dance as a way of life. It delicately stimulates and recruits the dancer's embodied awareness and poetic artistry to facilitate movement and creative freedoms. SRT frames a process of gently releasing deeply embedded, pre-conscious patterns of being within "the physical self" (Skinner 2006). It facilitates a process of transformation within the body through "releasing" or "letting go" (Skinner 2006) unnecessary tension and unconscious holding patterns toward more easeful and spontaneous ways of being and moving.

Joan Skinner (born 1924, USA) was a professional dancer at the highest level. Personally invited by Martha Graham, she danced with the Graham Company for three years, before leaving to dance soloist roles with the new Merce Cunningham Company, as well as working with American Dance Theatre and other choreographers in a range of popular and progressive stage genres and styles (Skinner Releasing Institute 2020). When Skinner's intense performing career was interrupted by injury – the rupture of a spinal disc – her personal journey of recovery led her to in depth study and practice of Alexander Technique (AT), a somatic approach to alignment, balance, spatiality and presence in the body, which became a major influence on her approach to movement practice and embodied experience. Skinner's poetic and embodied sensitivity and her dedicated daily personal practice would mean that AT could land unusually effectively in her physicality and in her awareness, and I would argue that Skinner's skilled absorption and application of AT is one of the notable early meeting points between creative expressive dance and somatic awareness. Absorbing much from AT, as well as discernible traces of a number of diverse influences present in US 1960's counterculture: jazz, Zen Buddhism (Neuhaus 2014) and emergent quantum science (Skura 1990), SRT frames a practical and philosophical shift from traditional dance technique training of working and controlling the body, to a softening and enlivening of "the whole self" (Skinner 2006).

SRT is developed around a series of “Underlying Principles” (Skinner 2010). Rather than teaching a set of given bodily or movement forms, the principles and practices of SRT support a process of releasing habitual personal patterns to facilitate and support any movement style. The Underlying Principles range from practical approaches such as “Awareness”, “Allowing” and “Autonomy” to more lofty and esoteric notions including: “Primal grace”, “Power through gentleness”, “Listening to essences of the physical self”, “Transparency”, “Alignment beyond the self” and “The Dance of Life” (Skinner 2010). These last few principles address qualities of being and represent further dimensions of freedom that require theoretical and philosophical input from sources beyond the scope of polyvagal theory and thus fall beyond the scope of this thesis. I will pursue these in my subsequent research.

SRT classes feature a series of carefully interwoven discrete elements which each address and stimulate the “physical self” (Skinner 2006) in different ways. Gentle hands-on manipulations of a partner; immersive visualisations of poetic images; textured music and sound; and free movement explorations creatively engage different aspects of the mind and body at various levels of consciousness. SRT supports a process that invites the student at times to enter “deep states, below the level of ordinary consciousness” (Skinner Releasing Institute 2019), where they are able to receive immersive imagery at a sensorial level and to dance with or “be danced” (Skinner 2006) by them. Combining different stimuli from touch to imagery, SRT highlights and privileges a rich and varied sensory landscape within the body. It encourages awareness of felt qualities within, and in the space around us – rhythms, light, colours, shapes and spaces; and teaches and practises how to move with and through both inner and outer sensory awareness.

SRT classes are long, usually lasting at least two hours, and within each class there is more than one opportunity for extended periods of rest and quiet, as well as for expansive movement. Students are gently guided through a rhythmic rise and fall of energetic states, between periods of deep rest and stillness and vigorous moving; each state delicately framed and invoked through imagery, touch, and guided kinaesthetic awareness. The teacher pays close observation to the shifting energy within the room, and classes are carefully paced so that students can experience gradual transitions at their own pace between phases of the class. We emerge from dances and visualisations slowly, “taking in the light and colours of the room”, and allow time for dances to “resolve themselves” (Skinner 2006) before moving on. The approach is radically permissive, with instructions given in the form of invitations into awarenesses and movement, and often lightened with reminders of the possibility at any point not to comply with that which is being suggested.

Essential elements of SRT classes are as follows:

### *Breath Awareness and Just Being*

These are small but important moments of quiet rest and stillness in the classes where students are invited to draw attention to the breath, and to experience “*just being*” (Skinner 2006). These often occur between intense or immersive parts of the class e.g. after a period of vigorous movement and before students are led into the deeper settling of a *checklist*.

### *Checklists*

These are guided deep relaxations that practise active letting go progressively through all parts of the body, facilitating a sense of softening and expansion. Usually occurring as students lie resting on the floor, the teacher verbally guides the tissues of different areas of the body to soften and let go. As classes progress the *checklists* gradually shift in flavour, inviting tissues into “softening”, “melting”, “lengthening”, “slipping”, and “sighing” (Skinner 2006) while lying and also while standing or moving. Over time *checklists* become increasingly spontaneous and eventually become established within the habit of the dancer.

### *Images*

SRT uses finely crafted poetic images to encapsulate the kinaesthetic qualities of different states and technical principles such as “multidirectional alignment”, “autonomy” “buoyancy”, “suspension” and so forth (Skinner 2006). Many of the images are taken from nature and include natural “sea sponges”, “velvety moss”, “white mist”, “gossamer threads”, and “caverns” (Skinner 2006). Other images are more fantastical or “fanciful” such as “an enormous hammock suspended between two clouds”, an “inner landscape of spaces, falling open” inside our bodies, “clusters of skull strings”, or “phantom hands” that suspend and support us as we move (Skinner 2006). Kinaesthetic *images* in the form of haiku-like poems are transmitted to the sensory tissues and imagination of the student through the teacher’s spoken voice; usually when students have closed eyes or are in a state of deep relaxation below ordinary consciousness.

### *Image Actions*

After speaking an image to a group of students, the teacher invites them to “see and feel” the image within the body. *Image actions* are the freeform dances that emerge as the student is invited to “allow the image to move us and move with us” (Skinner 2006). Generally supported by carefully selected music which supports the textures of the image, this can feel almost involuntary, as if we are “being danced” (Skinner 2006).

### *Totalities*

*Totalities* are rich and wholly immersive imaginative experiences, where kinaesthetic images are spoken to students in deep states of relaxation, without invitation to move, but simply an invitation to “merge” with the image; sometimes accompanied by music. *Totalities* can frame extraordinarily powerful, unfamiliar and transformative experiences of “letting go” and shifts in embodied being through sensation and imagination working together, while lying in stillness on the floor (Skinner 2006).

### *Partner Graphics*

These delicate, hands-on touches and manipulations are intended to offer a student the opportunity to experience an unfamiliar sensation or awareness in the body, generally one that supports releasing of holding, freedom and ease of movement. *Graphics* often offer experiences of “autonomy”, “suspension” or “alignment” (Skinner 2006) of a particular part or series of parts of the body. *Partner Graphics* are first demonstrated by the teacher with a student and then offered by students to one another. Students always “exchange roles” so that everyone both “gives” and “receives” each *partner graphic* (Skinner 2006). There is at least one *partner graphic* in every class. *Graphics* “plant seeds of kinaesthetic awareness” and the student is often invited to sense and dance with the “resonance” of a graphic throughout the “tissues of the physical self” (Skinner 2006).

### *Movement Studies*

These are freeform dance or movement explorations that practise a particular kinaesthetic awareness or technical principle such as “multidirectional alignment”, “buoyancy” or “loose bones” (Skinner 2006). They often follow and explore the kinaesthetic experience of *partner graphics*. They are generally supported by music and can also be supported by an image.

### *Music*

The music for SRT class is carefully selected and used for its textural and rhythmic qualities to match and support the felt kinaesthetic qualities of an image. Music considered suitable for SRT classes is spacious, resonant and expressive but not always melodic. The choice of music is extremely important as it supports the sensory experience of the image within the body, and considerable attention is given to music choices in the SRT teacher training process. Dancing also occurs in silence, to allow movement “to have “its own rhythm and musicality” (Skinner 2006).

### *Writing and Drawing*

Classes tend to end with time for free writing and drawing, where personal and sensory immersive process may be spilled onto the page. This forms a useful transition out of the deeply embodied and receptive state of being in the class. It also can provide an important link between a student's personal process and the teacher.

SRT has a structured pedagogy that is divided into carefully constructed series of fifteen "introductory" classes and twelve "ongoing" classes. The classes in the introductory series are the densest, each containing several of each of the different elements described above, and clearly and concisely introduce piece by piece all of the principles and practices of SRT. The introductory series frames a careful looping and layering of practices and awarenesses so that the "physical self" may explore and assimilate them, gradually cultivating more and more complex and coherent states of being. Ongoing classes are sparser, with fewer elements and represent "ongoing" embodied practice of the structures and principles of the technique.

### **Polyvagal theory**

Polyvagal theory developed by US psychiatrist and neuro-physiologist Dr Steven Porges since the early 1990s explains how an embodied experience of feeling safe within the ANS is the essential foundation of human behavioural and psychological wellness. Porges' theory has developed new understanding about how optimal function of the ANS - and in particular the vagus nerve - supports us in feeling safe; and about how we can address this to improve mental and physical health (Porges 2011:24-26). Practical applications of polyvagal theory are currently taking hold both in widespread clinical mental health practice and in a range of alternative complementary and integrative medicine (ACIM) practices and methods.

The *sympathetic* division of the ANS supports arousal for action and *mobilization*, whereas the *parasympathetic* division supports *immobilization* and states of rest and calm. Polyvagal theory identifies two distinct branches and functions of the parasympathetic *vagus* nerve (hence *poly-vagal*) and reveals how these different immobilizing circuits can have more and less positive effects on human function. Polyvagal theory identifies three essential neural complexes and circuits of the ANS which support different physiological states, each supporting different defensive and aggressive, or relaxed pro-social behaviours: the dorsal vagal complex; the sympathetic nervous system; and the the ventral vagal complex, (Porges 2017:159-161).

Polyvagal theory outlines how the human ANS has evolved to maintain survival in varied conditions of safety, danger or threat to life. In response to different levels of perceived safety

or threat, the three different circuits within the ANS increase or inhibit essential functions - blood pressure, heart rate, respiration and digestion - underpinning our basic homeostasis, and our capacity for connection with others, higher cognition, and our ability to cope and flourish in life (Porges 2017:127-9).

Essential concepts of polyvagal theory include:

### *Hierarchy*

Porges' concept of the *hierarchy* of autonomic state declares that three distinct autonomic neural complexes have developed three main defensive strategies in relation to significant stages of human evolution; each organised to ensure the safety and survival of the species as it developed. This highlights that autonomic states are innate survival responses, and they need to be understood and addressed within a hierarchical structure. This defines the ways that we are able to intervene in and process our defensive responses at a pre-conscious level (Porges 2017:161-2).

### *Neuroception*

Central to polyvagal theory, *neuroception* is the unconscious process by which the ANS constantly scans for, registers and communicates signals of safety or danger in the environment and within the body. Neural circuits between viscera and brain subconsciously evaluate and respond to perceived cues of safety or threat, and automatically support specific physiological responses and homeostatic states relevant to the context and situation (Porges 2011:193-4).

### *Co-regulation*

Polyvagal theory states that one of the primary ways that we establish a sense of safety is through *co-regulation* with the ANS of other people and beings. "Our nervous system craves reciprocal interaction to enable state regulation to feel safe" (Porges 2017:99). Through *neuroception*, nervous systems can calm and support one another. For Porges this begins with the mother or main care-giver in infancy and resonates through our ability to form bonds with others in later life (Porges 2011: 48-51).

## **Polyvagal Theory in Psychotherapy**

Psychotherapist Deb Dana has absorbed and adapted polyvagal theory into her clinical practice in mental health, aiming to support her clients in understanding and managing emotional dysregulation through addressing embodied state. Her work offers invaluable

insight into how the ANS can be understood, engaged and practically re-patterned to create pathways of safety and connection (Dana 2018).

### **Polyvagal Theory in Somatic Bodywork**

Somatic healer and body-worker Stanley Rosenberg's hands on manipulations and physical exercises offer specific interventions into anatomical locations of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. In particular he specifies the multiple emotional and physical symptoms which emerge from cranial nerve disfunction within the ANS. Rosenberg understands supporting optimal functioning of the ANS and the vagus nerve through these interventions as an effective way to treat a range of conditions including anxiety, depression, trauma and autism (Rosenberg 2017).

### **Somatic Experiencing**

Somatic Experiencing (SE) is the therapeutic method of releasing embodied trauma created by psychologist Dr Peter Levine. Embracing polyvagal theory, SE focusses on the immobilizing effects of shock and severe trauma and explores physical processes of engaging with trapped energy in the body. SE negotiates routes through safely re-encountering this trapped energy and very gradually releasing it, in order to support a return to wellness (Levine 1997).

### **Somatic Dance Movement Naturotherapy**

Pioneered in the UK by Dr Amanda Williamson and her Moving Soma practice<sup>4</sup>, Somatic Dance Movement Naturotherapy is based in the notion that given appropriate attention, direction and encouragement our bodies can explore instinctual paths towards wellbeing. Somatic Dance Movement Naturotherapy frames a process of self-regulation through somatic awareness and movement, stimulating optimal expression of the nervous as well as several other systems within the body. Williamson defines this as a natural, creative and spiritual healing process, able to meet and extend traditional Western medicine and an imperative response not only to severe trauma but to the normalised stress conditions of contemporary Western culture (Williamson 2020).

### **The Fear of Freedom**

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<sup>4</sup> associated with ISMETA The International Somatic Movement and Therapy Association

In this work, social psychologist Eric Fromm explores the notion of freedom as a spectrum from “freedom from” i.e. an absence of threat, constraint or oppression, to “freedom to” i.e. a state and a realm of possibility and spontaneous action. Fromm defines the achievement of “freedom to” as a process of individuation (Fromm 1942).

## Methodology

I have long been aware within my own body, and through observation and accounts of others, that significant changes occur within the frame of SRT: not only in terms of increased clarity and ease of movement but real shifts in energy state and the discovery of a new sense of inner stillness, confidence, belonging, and playful spontaneity. This project set out then to investigate SRT's capacity to engender and support such embodied states of safety and freedom and investigate my sense that SRT facilitates positive change within the nervous system.

In current Western medicine it is understood that the establishment of a bodily sense of safety (and thus of freedom) or otherwise occurs within the nervous system, in particular the ANS (Porges 2011, 2017). My research thus became focussed around discovering whether and how explicit and implicit aspects of SRT might be understood to access and support ANS function in real terms. I initially began with the simple question: can SRT be understood to effectively access and work with the ANS? As this became apparent, the questions developed to: how might SRT access and enliven different parts of the ANS through specific body awarenesses and dance processes? And finally: how does SRT, through activation of the ANS, facilitate embodied experiences of safety and freedom?

The research draws upon my wealth of first-person experience as a professional somatic dancer<sup>5</sup> - experience of numerous somatic movement and therapeutic practices, and a certified teacher of SRT<sup>6</sup> - and the extensive embodied knowledge, process and awareness that affords. Somatic dancers are in possession of highly developed skills in perceiving, allowing and exploring subtly felt states of being in the body, and this study is based in such embodied awarenesses that have emerged within my own dance practice as well as from supporting and observing the SRT practice of others over extended periods of time. This investigation considers and reflects upon these awarenesses and experiences in relation to the insights of polyvagal theory, and in so doing I unfold new analysis and interpretations of SRT.

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<sup>5</sup> A somatic dancer foregrounds awareness of internal bodily sensations and sensory awareness.

<sup>6</sup> While specialising in Skinner Releasing Technique, I have practiced and trained in numerous somatic dance and movement practices during my three decades as a professional dance artist primarily: Alexander Technique, Authentic Movement, Body Mind Centring, Experiential Anatomy, Feldenkrais, Kundalini Yoga, Qi Gong, Scaravelli Yoga; and have benefitted from several somatic movement therapeutic practices including Bodydynamics, Cranio Sacral Therapy, Manuvision, Rolfing, Somatic Experiencing.

Specificities of SRT practice, the structure and content of SRT material, and personal embodied experience, are analysed and discussed in light of the details of ANS function as it is revealed through polyvagal theory. This recent development in medical science is explored through the lens of my own and others' experience of SRT process, in order to build an understanding of the palpable physiological and emotional changes which occur for many people through SRT. I draw together the transformative experience and sense of embodied knowing which SRT concedes with Porges' scientific discoveries, and look for ways in which they can meet, inform and inspire each other. I consider both conceptual and physiological aspects of polyvagal theory in relation to my experience of practising and teaching details of SRT material, and take a fresh look at Joan Skinner's "Underlying Principles" (Skinner 2010) to explore how the two fields can be seen to interconnect and reveal one another. Through the research I have been able to articulate how SRT pays delicate and specific attention to the anatomy of primary parts of the ANS, and how it facilitates specific structures of activity and awareness that I argue can indeed be understood to recruit and skilfully support ANS function at multiple levels of consciousness. Further, I suggest that SRT thus contains insight about human functioning and potential – specifically our capacities for sensory awareness and through this for shifting our embodied experience of self and world - and offers frames of expert practice that is able to lighten and support embodied life.

My research initially began by looking at somatic approaches to trauma therapy - specifically Dr Peter Levine's SE (Levine 2010, 2017) - as a source of understanding an embodied process deliberately designed to enable individuals to move from habitual states of inhibition towards greater relaxation and freedom. Meaningful overlaps between elements of SE theory and practices and aspects of SRT became apparent, and these are discussed later in the thesis. I came to focus primarily however on polyvagal theory as the scientific understanding which underpins SE and other current approaches to treating trauma and embodied wellbeing, through its analysis of the ANS's various defensive strategies and processes of sensing and expressing safety and connection. Polyvagal theory is the most recent, far-reaching and influential body of work in this field of expertise; providing new understanding of the physiology of how humans are able to experience states of safety and thus to effectively and freely interact with their environment and other beings. As it developed, my research thus became focussed on how these powerful new perspectives on the form and function of the ANS might inform elements of SRT.

Alongside studying the theory, I have also drawn extensively upon a number of therapeutic practices which engage polyvagal theory, and which usefully inform SRT's multi-layered

practical process. Psychotherapist Deb Dana and somatic bodyworker Stanley Rosenberg<sup>7</sup> have both in different ways adopted and applied polyvagal theory centrally in their healing models and study of their work has illuminated how different aspects of SRT can be understood to work with the ANS. Dana (2018, 2020) highlights compassionate presence and actively works to develop skills in embodied self-awareness to empower her clients to recognise, understand and navigate their own habitual states of being in the ANS. Her work reveals the value of the sensory skills inherent to SRT, and the structures of effectively shifting energetic states that SRT frames. Dana's approach - focusing on *co-regulation* and the passive experience of habituated ANS responses - affirms the vitality of SRT's innate compassion and the transformative potential of SRT's implicit highlighting and play within interpersonal space. Rosenberg (2017) meanwhile, primarily uses hands-on touch and specific exercises offering direct somatic intervention to support physiological function through the ANS. His work informs many of the practical and anatomical interventions of SRT classes including specific *partner graphics* and *movement studies*, offering valuable insight into their operational efficacy in supporting the ANS. Levine's (1997, 2010) SE process of releasing limiting habitual defensive states throws new light on the transformative functions within particular recurring movement activities and imagery of SRT. Explored in conjunction with polyvagal theory, this reveals how signature aspects of SRT process can facilitate change in nervous system state. Finally, the conviction of somatic dance movement naturotherapist Dr Amanda Williamson (2020) that release-based dancers are in possession of skilled embodied practices and insight into supporting anatomical and spiritual functions of the self including the ANS through creative sensing and movement practices, importantly frames and encourages this work. Together, these various practitioners offer a bridge between the logical, laboratory-based, scientific research of Steven Porges and the intuitive, creative process of SRT, and have been instrumental in the development of my thesis.

As I am unfolding an original understanding of SRT, in terms of literature I refer primarily to Joan Skinner's own words: to the transcripts of her teaching each of the fifteen dense and finely crafted classes of the introductory series (2006), and to her sparse but inspired notes outlining eleven "Underlying Principles of the Skinner Releasing Technique" (2010). I also refer to Skinner's words from two seminal interviews with Skura (1990) and Neuhaus (2014). Skinner's use of language to guide movement explorations and somatic awareness is sensitive and poetic, addressing technical principles in a delicately oblique way via imagery and poetic language, addressing for example the "tissues" as opposed to specific muscles or organs, and "the physical self" rather than the body (Skinner 2006). This invites a sense of

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<sup>7</sup> Rolfing and cranio-sacral therapy

respect for the unbounded possibility of sensory experience, and encourages awarenesses to emerge on their own terms, minimising anticipation or controlling of what occurs. I quote Skinner's language extensively in order to demonstrate its unique approach and value in stimulating human physicality and sensorial creativity.

Throughout my research I have consistently pursued a personal movement and somatic attunement practice, consisting of SRT "kinaesthetic rituals" (Skinner 2010) as well as personal processes that have emerged from this exploring my own prevailing embodied themes and patterns. Maintaining practice in parallel to the theoretical research has been a vivid reminder of the parallel co-existence, difference and sometimes disconnect between rational thought and the mystery and uncontrollability of the deep workings of body and feelings. I embrace the notion that any attempt to overlay and intertwine such different paradigms will be both partial and speculative but, resisting Western tendencies to minimise embodied knowing, I argue that (beyond the simple necessity of it for my own wellbeing) live movement practice brings relevant ongoing embodied awareness to the table. I would argue that this level of process is particularly pertinent here as polyvagal theory itself foregrounds the largely unrecognised intelligence and automatism of the body. During the research, and speaking directly into the space between rational cognitive and intuitive embodied processes, I used exercises from Dr Eline Kieft's online 'Somatics Toolkit' to navigate my relationship to the research literature. Kieft's toolkit is a "set of resources for ethnographers and others who want to bring their bodies more deeply into their research" (Kieft n.d) and offers a series of exercises designed to explore aspects of academic research through embodied awareness. I found the process of exploring academic literature through movement particularly useful and revealing, enabling me to sense and address complex theoretical material spatially, energetically and intuitively, and to develop and understand a felt relationship with it. It enabled me to address therapeutic and scientific material from a position of embodied awareness and responsiveness, and supported the unfolding process of understanding and articulating the arguments within the thesis.

This work is intended to be of interest to practitioners and researchers in the fields of creative somatic dance as well as to those concerned with wider issues of embodied human wellbeing. It offers somatic dancers, and in particular SRT practitioners, a new understanding of the technique's potential - to support nervous system function and thus creative and expressive freedoms – which will be useful to professional dancers and vocational teachers, and also to those working with dance in the wider community and contexts of arts in health. It is aimed also at the growing field of embodied processes that aim to specifically support experiential changes of state within the nervous system, and felt experience of safely arriving in and

negotiating self and world. Coming from a creative and expressive dance form as opposed to an explicitly therapeutic or wellbeing practice, I suggest that this research offers subtleties of understanding and useful practical perspectives regarding how to ignite sensory awareness and support imaginative and playful pathways to ANS expression and human vitality at multiple levels of consciousness.

## **PART ONE**

### **SRT, the ANS and Access to Autonomic State**

PART ONE presents the fundamentals of polyvagal theory in relationship to SRT. It maps out the ways in which SRT can be understood to meet and engage directly with the anatomical physiology and working patterns of the ANS, offering new experiences of the self, and new experiences of safety and freedom. The essential direction of travel through Porges' hierarchy of states is compared to SRT class structure; and Porges' highlighting of the afferent sensory pathways of the ANS is related to SRT's innate understanding and use of sensation as a creative tool for change. I explore how SRT frames access to the different basic physiological states that the ANS supports, and address how SRT classes offer creative routes into and between the autonomic states, as well as specific anatomical intervention into significant areas of the ANS.

#### **SRT and the Hierarchy of the Basic Autonomic States**

Polyvagal theory outlines three primary *autonomic states* that arise through innervation of different parts of the ANS in response to different levels of perceived safety or threat (Porges 2011:15-16):

- A calm state of relaxed engagement and connection that arises when we are feeling safe. This is primarily supported by innervation of the *ventral branch* of the *vagus nerve*, or *vagal tone*, and the feeling it produces is characterised as “safe and social” (Dana 2018:26-27).
- A state of arousal when threat is perceived. This is supported by activation of the *sympathetic nerve chain* to support *mobilization* and is typically characterised as “fight or flight” (Dana 2018:10).
- A severely *immobilized* state that arises in response to extreme threat or overwhelm. This is supported by activation of the *dorsal branch* of the *vagus nerve* and is characterised as “freeze”, “collapse” or “shutdown” (Dana 2018:10).

Polyvagal theory explains that each of these different states, and the distinct neural circuits that support them, are the result of separate stages in human evolution; and that we live with and manage them within certain limitations that come with that history. Polyvagal theory suggests that with an understanding of this we can learn to navigate them. It defines a specific, hierarchically ordered trajectory or progression through the differentiated qualities of the

autonomic states, which we must both respect and can learn to work with (Porges 2011:30-1).

Porges' concept of this *hierarchy* offers a structure for understanding the nature, the causes and the functions of primary autonomic states; and through this, ways of working with them to secure optimal states of being – essentially to support establishing the possibility of feeling safe, and thus to have the freedom to engage with the world. I propose that the limits defined by this *hierarchy* are intuitively understood within SRT and that SRT frames explorative practices which support efficient navigation through the *hierarchy*, enabling activation and expression of each of the states with efficiency and minimal stress. Porges' notion of *hierarchy* is organised around processes of seeking appropriate states of safety, and I use it to reveal how SRT can both support this and expand upon the quality and embodied nature of that safety.

As stated, each of Porges' fundamental autonomic states emerges through the activation of a specific neural circuit or subsystem of the ANS. Each of these separate subsystems evolved as a defensive survival mechanism in response to the conditions of life at its time, and all three remain active within the human nervous system today. Primitive water-dwelling invertebrates developed only a basic *immobilization* or 'freeze' response – a *dorsal vagal state* – in response to threat of death. Later, vertebrate fish and early mammals evolved *sympathetic arousal* to support voluntary movement or *mobilization*, enabling them to fight off or flee from danger. Finally as humans evolved with the pre-frontal cortex of the human brain, a third autonomic state - the *ventral vagal state* enabling social engagement evolved. We share this most advanced parasympathetic state with other cortical mammals. This optimal state, supported by *ventral vagal tone* arises in conditions of perceived safety via activation of the most recently developed *ventral branch* of the *vagus nerve*. This, together with four other cranial nerves, forms a particular neural subsystem which Porges identifies as the *social engagement system*. In conditions of safety, activation of the *ventral neural circuit*, or the *social engagement system*, creates the *neural platform* for optimal behavioural and psychological wellness (Porges 2011:27-31).

The three different states are activated via the different parts of the human ANS, in response to different stimuli. Polyvagal theory defines a specific *hierarchy of activation*, whereby we engage each of the different autonomic subsystems in order of preference, starting with the most recently evolved, most sophisticated and optimal *ventral state*, then transitioning through *sympathetic arousal* towards the most limiting and primitive *dorsal state*. When all is well, we are able to relax, recruit Porges' *social engagement system* through the *ventral vagal circuit*,

and connect spontaneously and effectively with others. We are able to receive and to give off cues of safety in a benign cycle of homeostasis in the primary organs, and non-threatening social interaction. If we feel threatened, we first rally the *mobilizing* forces of *sympathetic arousal* to support aggression or retreat. If that fails to return us to safety - because the threat is overwhelming or escape impossible - we finally resort to profound *immobilization*, shutting down digestive, communicative and sensory functions and preserving only the most basic life status. Polyvagal theory signifies that a process of then re-establishing the desired *ventral state* requires a return journey back through activation of each state in the *hierarchy* (Dana 2018:10-11).

Each of the autonomic states has its particular qualities related fundamentally to increased or reduced cardiac stimulus (Porges 2011:82), and they generate a range of associated physical, psychological and emotional experiences within humans. Changes in autonomic state and the process of transitioning between them involves numerous shifts in the fabric and the experience of the self, which subtly define our quality of life. I argue that SRT is naturally well equipped to meet and encourage these shifts, and thus to alleviate the associated feelings. Changes in autonomic state involve changes in perception of the internal state of the body and organs: typically numbness in dorsal shutdown; restlessness in sympathetic arousal; or a sense of calm functioning in a ventral state. Shifts in autonomic state also involve changes in attention and awareness of the external environment from the hyper-vigilance of sympathetic arousal, to the sensory dissociation of a dorsal state. Shifts in autonomic state involve significant physiological changes to basic homeostatic functions affecting digestion, respiration, heart-rate and blood flow, muscle tension and adrenal activity. There can be major shifts in emotional response – from the joy of ventral activation; to anxiety or rage with sympathetic arousal; and shame or despair in profound dorsal shutdown. Changes in autonomic state additionally involve significant changes in energy quality – between the relaxed, easeful flow of ventral; the flexion and muscular activity of sympathetic, or debilitating weakness and lethargy in dorsal. Changes in mental capacity also occur, from the creativity and curiosity of a *ventral state* to the ‘drawing blank’ or total loss of rational cortical processing in a severe *dorsal state*. All of these states - each of them responses to a perceived condition of safety or absence of safety - and the changes they produce via the ANS affect the resources available to us. In response to different real world circumstances we access all of these ANS conditions.

I suggest that in SRT we enter and explore each of the states. Through *movement studies*, *partner graphics*, *checklists* and *image actions* we are guided and supported to move in and out of states of mobilization and deep rest. With our cognitive capacities absorbed in imagery,

in internal and external perception, our attention is focussed in the sensory nuances of unfolding embodied experience. In SRT we have very intense and immersive sensorial experiences and we learn to follow their lead. We practise surrendering to the kinaesthetic experience and allowing the sensations within our body to move us. I propose that the limits defined by Porges' hierarchy are intuitively understood within SRT and that SRT creates practices which support efficient navigation of this complex and potentially restrictive process, enabling us to make smooth transitions across the divisions between the states, and supporting us to find the inner space to adapt to increased or decreased mobilization with minimal effort and "without hitches or glitches" (Skinner 2006).

### **SRT and the Afferent and Efferent Pathways of the ANS**

Autonomic states arise through the unconscious process of *neuroception*. Different neural circuits receive and transmit cues of safety or otherwise from within and without the body, increasing or reducing homeostatic functions accordingly. Porges highlights that nerves of the ANS are both *efferent* (sending *motor* impulses from the brain and central nervous system to the body) and *afferent* (transmitting *sensory* stimuli from the body into the central nervous system and brain). Approximately 80 percent of neural fibres in the crucial *vagus nerve*, are *afferent*, or *sensory*, relaying information about the state of organs and body to the brain, while only 20 percent of vagal nerve function is *efferent*, or *motor*, sending information from the brain to regulate organs and body parts. Porges work is progressive in acknowledging the agency within the *afferent pathways of the ANS* (Porges 2017:30). I would argue that this level of sensory activity and its transmission through the body points toward the potency and relevance of finely tuned perceptive and responsive dance interventions, and reveals a window to vagal innervation which SRT intuitively enters and makes use of.

Porges points out that "...medical training provides very limited understanding of vagal afferents. Thus medical treatments seldom acknowledge possible influences due to feedback from the organ to the brain. Changing sensory feedback has the potential to influence mental and physical health" (Porges 2017:3). That the nervous system is innately so biased towards 'bottom-up' sensory function is not surprising however to a dancer, least of all a somatic dancer. SRT functions on the premise that the body has its own desires and designs, and facilitates a process of tapping into, awakening and encouraging "kinaesthetic awareness" (Skinner 2006) - or a tuning in to sensory information – and inviting this to unfurl in free movement, both within and beyond the bounds of ordinary consciousness. In many different ways SRT delicately stimulates, responds to, empowers and gives expression to sensory pathways. Through immersive imagery, touch, and movement explorations, classes delicately

stimulate sensory qualities within the body. We receive sensory information through our afferent nerves and invite them into creative experimentation, allowing them to play out in their own terms through the efferent and afferent pathways as sensation itself takes the lead, and “becomes our dance” (Skinner 2006). SRT practises and develops skills in deeply embodied sensory awareness, and empowers this into self-expression through imagination and in movement.

Dr Amanda Williamson describes how moving gently with closed eyes to reduce exteroceptive information entering the nervous system, and taking the time to tap into a felt sense of gravity and breath (both recurrent invitations within an SRT class) can innervate the *vagus*, nurturing senses of internal safety through the 80% afferent pathways (Williamson 2020:172-3). SRT frames patient and careful guidance into these awarenesses, leading into detailed excavation and activation of pre-conscious bodily needs and desires and supports this ventral vagal and other ANS innervation through movement steeped in imagination and sound. I suggest that the sensory-based movement of SRT functions as a stealthy intervention into and innervation of the different circuits of the ANS, and supports experiential transitioning between the different autonomic states of being that Porges describes.

I posit that SRT’s wide embrace of markedly different energetic states; its patient guidance into and steering through them - following the scent of emerging kinaesthetic awareness - intuitively enables embodied experience of the essential structures of each of the *dorsal vagal*, *sympathetic*, and the desired *ventral vagal* states. SRT *image actions*, *partner graphics*, *totalities* and *movement studies* gently invite both increasing softening and letting go into parasympathetic states of rest or immobilization, as well as increasing sympathetic arousal in the ANS to support mobilization, made easeful and accessible through careful, focussed sensing into and stimulation of bodily tissue. I argue indeed that through its sensory innervation and activation SRT reveals and rehearses new richness and potential within the states, across the spectrum of ANS innervation, offering exceptionally penetrating and animated access to each of the autonomic states, and practises smoothly and efficiently etching routes between them.

### **SRT’s Routes of Access to Ventral Vagal Innervation**

Innervation of the ventral branch of the vagus nerve allows us to embody experiences of safety, and the possibility to truly arrive in and connect with the world. “When we are firmly grounded in our ventral vagal pathway, we feel safe and connected” (Dana 2018:9). Joan Skinner has said that the most common response to her classes is students reporting “feeling

a wholeness, feeling integrated, feeling at peace with myself” (Skinner, in Neuhaus 2014). I know this sense of relaxed allowing and belonging in SRT from experience, and it is by far the most common response I hear from students. SRT then, commonly engenders states of comfortable relaxation that represent ventral vagal stimulus.

Porges recognises that the vagus can be intentionally stimulated through movement and Dana and Rosenberg have both developed and incorporated this within their clinical practices. Dana introduces exercises highlighting qualities of slowness and tuning in to sensation, noticing subtle shifts, as her clients gently explore archetypal movement patterns: contracting and expanding, or moving towards and away from another being. “As a practice, these movements offer your clients a direct way to come into connection with the restorative powers of ventral vagal calm and the expansive powers of the ventral vagal zest for life” (Dana 2018 p160).

Processes of slowing down and safely meeting the sensory information that arises within basic movement patterns lie at the heart of SRT. In one *movement study*, we spend time slowly sensing and exploring feeling qualities of “curling and uncurling” (Skinner 2006), and allow this to develop into a spontaneous dance. A *partner graphic* has us move gently through space towards a partner, sensing and respecting the energetic information arising between us. We practise sensing into the somatic information arising within, around and between our bodies – our “physical selves” (Skinner 2006) - towards increased softening and expansiveness. Attentiveness to sensory experience is common to all somatic practices, while in SRT I would argue we develop particular skills in freely exploring and inhabiting the material and kinaesthetic richness of this information through dance. Focussed explorations foreground and clarify sensorial qualities related to technical principals of simplicity and freedom, while always remaining open to and inviting the emergence of personal patterns, sensations and desires in the moment to emerge. We practice safety and expansion while encountering ourselves. In a gently looping process, we discover the body’s capacity and willingness to soften and expand, while coming to know and mitigate its own unconscious defensive or holding patterns. We inhabit the existing patterns and realities of our body, while cultivating the notion that “no one part of the physical self, compresses against any other part of the physical self” (Skinner 2006). Expansion is supported by imagery of “an inner landscape of spaces, falling open”; by practising “multi-directional alignment” in *partner graphics*; and *movement studies* where we “luxuriate in space” (Skinner 2006). SRT frames a constant process of developing a greater capacity to soften and to resource simpler and more efficient routes to sustainable flows of energy.

As evidenced in its name, SRT is first and foremost a practice of releasing unnecessary and unconscious holding or tension in all of the “tissues of the physical self” (Skinner 2006), and of developing a state of more embodied ease, simplicity and calm, supporting more possibilities for openness and engagement. It is a practice of actively “softening” and “melting” the tissues of the body so that we can have more space and fluidity within, and access to flows of energy – “more freedom to move” (Skinner 2006). I have written frequently on the astonishing discovery of new possibilities for ease of being in the body and in movement - of discovering the possibility of restfulness within movement - that SRT has revealed to me; has taught me how to feel; and – with continued practice - provides lasting access to. This occurs not simply through softening major muscle groups but in the careful somatic attention given to “cultivating sponginess throughout the physical self”, “cultivating the freedom of the breath”, or in finding frictionless simplicity and “letting go” (Skinner 2006) deep inside the pelvis, across the sacrum and around the coccyx<sup>8</sup>, in the base of the skull and back of the neck. And the continuous softening is provided with support from within the centre of the body: moving with images of “multidirectional alignment”, of a flexible and spacious “central axis”, as we practise moving with “inner suspension” (Skinner 2006).

I propose then that SRT is in essence a technique which, with unusual depth, detail and delicacy, foregrounds and facilitates ventral vagal activation in the ANS; and offers effective routes to a profoundly embodied state of safe, relaxed presence and potential.

### **SRT, “Sponginess” and the ANS**

The comforting volume and spaciousness of SRT is encapsulated in and stimulated by the image of “natural sponginess” (Skinner 2006). From the early classes we are encouraged to “see and feel our tissues and bones transforming, into a state of sponginess” (Skinner 2006). This image contains softness, aeration, fluid, plasticity and a springy resilience. We often bring into class a bowl of water containing natural sea sponges for our students to hold and explore through touch, with their eyes open and closed, to assist them to come to know and assimilate precise kinaesthetic information within their tissues and bones. This essential sponginess is a basic resource of embodied comfort, support, flexibility, resilience and safety.

Further, in the light of polyvagal theory, I would like to suggest that the image of the natural sea sponge used in SRT classes importantly conjures and represents our distant ancestral

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<sup>8</sup> SRT avoids detailed anatomical language – does not specify sacrum or coccyx, but I use these words to show how specific sensations in specific areas can be very clear within SRT practice.

evolutionary form lying within our ANS. As well as supporting the warmth and openness of a ventral state, cultivating “sponginess” within our bodies provocatively reaches back into the most primitive dark ages of our phylogenetic history that Porges defines and which he demonstrates remains so alive within our nervous system. Evidence suggests that sea sponges are 640 million years old and are likely to have been the first animals on earth, perhaps even that they are the remnants of an unknown earlier, more evolved animal (MIT, 2016). Contemporary sea sponges - without brain, neurons or organs - have the very simplest beginnings of a nervous system. They have no synapses as such, but contain genetic components of synapses which are 90% the same as those of humans. Sea sponges cannot experience pain, and cannot actively swim, but they have the basic ability to react to stimuli, to contract and to expand, to pump and filter nutrients (Yong 2009). I propose that the embodied process of absorbing this image in SRT class relates us sensorially to and ignites the oldest, most primitive aspect of our nervous system which Porges has identified as supporting our most basic capacities for life and movement. We spend time exploring the kinaesthetic possibility of “sponginess”, as visualisation and sensory exploration intertwine and inspire one another within our movement. I suggest that in meeting and feeling the resource of “sponginess”, discovering the ability to soften, to yield and to expand deep within the fabric of the physical self, is not only incredibly supportive, restful, comforting and resourcing to our system, encouraging space and fluidity to be present in our cells and tissues, but that it also echoes and integrates the most basic circuits of our ANS. I propose then that SRT’s embodiment of “sponginess”, underpinning and connecting us into a basic resilience, a springiness and capacity for bouncing-back within cellular tissue and an expanding-contracting, self-nourishing flow of life, offers both our primitive dorsal and our ventral vagus pathways into activation which can innervate and support our “physical self” (Skinner 2006) in the most fundamental kind of vitality. Drawing on Porges’ theory, I argue that this vitality is integrated expression of the ANS, and that it can be effectively encouraged through the imagery, sensory skills and creative movement of SRT.

Students have often asked me “what is happening when I feel myself becoming spongy?” SRT practitioners all know this felt experience, without knowing – or needing to know – exactly how or why it occurs in a scientific sense. We feel a spontaneous and organic shift, a change, towards spaciousness and ease and a kind of internal energy and volume that supports us without the need for revving up or bracing for action. I propose that part of what is happening is a gentle but powerful stimulus at a very deep level within the ANS and associated homeostatic optimisation, which is innervating and supporting the “physical self”.

“Sponginess” contains a springiness and bounce, and a potential for mobilization which grows and increases within a class, encouraged through carefully chosen music, and evolves through the larger SRT process. In the related image of a bouncing “pulse” deep inside the pelvis, supported by “soft knees and ankles”, a “suspended torso” and a “floating skull” (Skinner 2006), we find ourselves softly and easily rising and falling with a natural spring. The hands of a partner offer additional support as they cup around the lower ribs in the recurrent “torso suspension” *partner graphic*. This touch gently encourages our upper body to maintain “inner suspension” and “dynamic stillness” (Skinner 2006) as we move. Patiently and generously our partner’s hands follow and support us as we “rise into the air” (Skinner 2006), bounce here and there in space, and discover light and easeful mobilization. Through the progression of the classes, the initial softness and life within sponginess, inspired by the image of the pulse, gains aeration and “inner space” and becomes the vital SRT state of peaceful mobilization that Skinner terms “buoyancy” (2006). Within SRT classes, “buoyancy” is embodied and explored in many different *image actions* and *movement studies*, in different parts of the “physical self”. Through playful “buoyancy dances” (Skinner 2006) the body’s weight and volume is embraced and negotiated.

### **SRT, Kinaesthetic Imagery and the ANS**

I argue that SRT’s “kinaesthetic imagery” (Skinner 2006) helps stimulate and innervate the pathways of the ANS. SRT develops exceptional skills in allowing, tuning in to, and unfolding the nature of embodied sensations as they arise uniquely for each of us through its use of imagery, which is vivid and accessible, expressed in simple, poetic language. We are invited to blend or “merge” with an image, to “see and feel” (Skinner 2006) it as it unfolds within the mind’s eye and within the body. Kinaesthetic imagery possesses sensory and textural details. It is immersive, and we inhabit it, follow it, and journey with it as it changes and grows in our imagination, our feeling and our moving. For example we are invited to see and feel “...the breath as a white mist - curling around each vertebra, trailing along our ribs, and spiralling out along the long bones of our limbs. This becomes our dance” (Skinner 2006).

SRT imagery is not overtly or restrictively didactic, but can freely unfold in different ways within the sensations and patterns of an individual’s body. Allowing the imagery to “move us, and move with us” supports a genuine arising and a following of the “unexpected” (Skinner 2006). SRT’s crucial Underlying Principle of “Allowing” challenges the student to practise surrendering to the unfolding instincts of the body, supported by the image.

“Allowing something to happen, rather than controlling to make something happen is a major key of this technique. To allow, one has to practice letting go – letting go of preconception – letting go of anticipation – to just be there... allow for the releasing of fixed states of being – the releasing of imagination.” (Skinner 2010).

Dancer, educator and SRT teacher Dr Kirsty Alexander describes the special attentiveness to kinaesthetic experience in SRT which encourages us to apprehend the sensorial, emotional, energetic or other felt qualities that appear to us, rather than a tendency to intend or anticipate what we might perceive.

“The notion of kinaesthetic experience that I take from Skinner alludes to how our awareness of sensation can be drawn as well as directed, in other words it refers to an attunement to affect rather than a fine-tuning of intention” (Alexander 2017: 2).

In SRT we attend to kinaesthetic experience with devotion, and in such a way that facilitates apprehension of affective states, allowing them to surface spontaneously in increasingly vivid textural and energetic qualities. SRT develops the opportunities, the skills and the faith to sense into and play with the spatiality and rhythms of embodied feeling states in exquisite detail. Echoing and extending the movement based processes Dana describes to come to know and work with autonomic states, I would argue that SRT’s richness and creative exploration of somatic practice potentially redefines how we can engage with the ANS.

### **SRT and Negotiating the Edges of Safety within the ANS**

While the immersive kinaesthetic experience may be particularly free and rich in SRT, there is a conscious focus on safety in the therapeutic approach which is valuable. Dana describes inviting a client to shift back and forth between folding into a foetal position “often linked to dorsal vagal collapse” (Dana 2018:159) and unfolding and extending outwards towards a potentially unsafe experience of vulnerability and exposure. The client is encouraged to closely track the changes in sensation and particularly to sense “the edges” (Dana 2018:159) of where they feel safe. Dana encourages her clients to develop a “ventral vagal anchor” - a thought cue or position - that returns them to a feeling of safety. She helps clients come to recognise and respect their edge of safety by gently reversing the motion at that point, or pausing to rest and “reconnect with their ventral vagal anchor” (Dana 2018:159).

This level of careful, conscious tracking of our experience as we move - particularly with regard to our sense of safety or unsafety - is not a taught feature of SRT in the sense that tracking one’s experience, or developing an ‘inner witness’, is a primary feature of Authentic Movement or other dance therapy practices. As a dancer however, I well know the thrill of the ride in SRT;

the emotional challenge of meeting and dancing with those edges. I am able to tackle them, skirt them, or delicately consent to and engage with them. In SRT the body comes to know with what it wants to play. I would suggest that for a dancer the very state of movement - of being attuned to the body and its experience of weight and space and motion - is in itself a “ventral vagal anchor” (Dana 2018:159). And from there, in SRT we can gradually become more sensitive and open both to our vulnerabilities and to our powers. Sometimes I will boldly cross that line at the edge of safety, experimenting with the unfamiliar, with loss of control or composure, and sometimes I won’t. While building our resources, SRT delicately offers constant opportunities to sense and negotiate the unknown. Repeatedly we are invited to allow our unfolding sensations, to allow a dance to “take us somewhere unexpected, perhaps?” (Skinner 2006). Sometimes, in the state of “being danced” (Skinner 2006) we can be swept up and carried far beyond what we may normally assume to be the edge of our body’s physical capacity, or our creative comfort zone. Sometimes this fails and we are painfully confronted with our limitations. Safety, although not named or deliberately addressed in SRT, is constantly relevant and present, constantly nurtured, tested, re-discovered and assured. In SRT this is not framed in overtly therapeutic terms, but the process becomes a steady expansion of the embodied state of the possible. Dancing – granting myself the time and permission to respond in motion to the inner and outer realities of any given moment - is an awakened and empowered state, through which I arrive, safely and creatively, in the world.

SRT’s *partner graphics*, *image actions*, *movement studies* and *totalities* invite and practise softening of unconscious embodied holding patterns, and offer experiential glimpses of new freedoms, set alive in the clarity and vibrancy of “kinaesthetic awareness” whereby we imagine, we feel and play before we know or understand. In certain *graphics*, for example, we offer our partner the simple yet surprising sensation of “autonomy” (Skinner 2006) of the arms or legs, as we gently support and move our partner’s limbs for them, independently of the shoulders, or the pelvis. As our partners “practise letting go” (Skinner 2006) of habitual holding in the shoulders or the hips, we offer their limbs an experience of new qualities of lightness and freedom. Sensory information is transmitted experientially through touch and image, simply and directly to our tissues, with minimal explanation or instruction, so that it is a felt, bodily process. According to polyvagal theory, our 80% afferent nerve fibres of the ANS would signal that melting softness, lightness and freedom to the brain and support us most efficiently and effectively towards a highly embodied and alive *ventral state*.

Further, in SRT this state is invited into dance. These “dances of shifting awareness” explore the “echoes” or the “resonances” of certain imagery or specific kinaesthetic experiences; embody and embed these feeling states through setting them in motion, allowing them “to take

us somewhere” (Skinner 2006) and to come alive in dances. And gradually these sensory glimpses of new freedoms become part of our known experience, not expressions or demonstrations, but live unfolding and discovery that we can increasingly safely absorb, inhabit, and come to rely upon. Students are encouraged to practice daily outside of the studio Joan Skinner’s “kinaesthetic rituals” (Skinner 2010) - simple movements and accompanying awarenesses of releasing, alignment and inner stillness - and to incorporate them into our movements through daily life. Embodied safety and freedoms enter our vernacular to buoy us up and broaden our possibilities of lived experience.

## **SRT and the Social Engagement System**

Lying beneath our ability to feel safe with and able to connect to others and our environment, Porges’ *social engagement system* is innervated by the ventral circuit of the vagus which travels to the heart and face, in close collaboration with four other cranial nerves innervating the face and neck<sup>9</sup> (Rosenberg 2017:17-18). Good function of the *social engagement system* plays a major role in our ability to arrive and become present in the world, to tolerate our environment and develop bonds with others (Porges 2017:25-26). This has a direct effect on core aspects of our physiology as well as on our ability to be present and connected in our world. “...the neural pathways of social support and social behaviour are shared with the neural pathways that support health, growth and restoration” (Porges 2017:100).

Core to the *social engagement system* is the *ventral vagus* connecting the heart with the face and lungs, forging a direct connection between the state of heart and lungs with possibilities of facial mobility. Efferent pathways innervate the muscles of the neck, throat, voice, face and head specifically in the pharynx, larynx and inner ear, and regulate the state of the heart and the bronchi. Porges refers to the “face-heart connection, which links social behaviour and autonomic regulation” (Porges 2017:126); and identifies the initial function of this circuit as supporting sucking, swallowing, breathing and vocalising in infancy. He is clear that failures to establish these developmental patterns at the outset of life can underpin behavioural and emotional difficulties in adulthood. Through development of the *social engagement system* we are able to perceive and experience safe connection with others – communicate through facial expression, vocalisation and listening. When functioning well, this autonomic circuit supports neuromuscular suppleness and expressivity in all parts of the face and neck as well as sensitive vocal and listening skills, whereas lack of mobility in the face indicates dissociation,

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<sup>9</sup> The social engagement system is made up of 5 cranial nerves (CN’s) all originating in the brainstem and innervating the face, throat, head and neck: trigeminal nerve (CN V); facial nerve (CN VII); glossopharyngeal nerve (CN IX); vagus nerve (CN X) and accessory nerve (CN XI).

and tightening in these muscles indicates sympathetic arousal, aggression and threat (Porges 2017:26-7).

I posit that through carefully directed awareness and *partner graphics*, SRT stimulates and engages the nerve pathways and muscles of Porges' *social engagement system* and practices its attributes in powerful and creative ways. SRT practice involves sensing and releasing the muscles in the face and neck to receive and transmit a state of being open, flexible and alive, in ways that are not strictly social, but vibrantly present, aware and connected in an embodied sense.

Cultivating "suppleness" (Skinner 2006) in the tissues and muscles in the face, jaw and throat is a fundamental focus of SRT. After settling into the floor and breath, many checklists begin with the fingertips "lightly combing the tissues" of the face, the jaw, neck and throat, encouraging them to "soften and become supple" (Skinner 2006). We often practise actively lifting, widening and softening the gaze; allowing the eyes gently and naturally to open "all the way to the cheekbones and to the temples" and "take in the horizon" (Skinner 2006) as we move. This has a profound effect on our sense of inhabiting space. We activate the inner ear through listening attentively – to music, to voice and to the ambient sounds of quietness in the studio. And, unusually for dancers, SRT students are invited to "sound" - to utter basic sounds, and to playfully vocalise the breath - "experiment with sighing" (Skinner 2006) aloud, as they move. This can be incredibly freeing and fun. And it innervates the specific muscles of the jaw, the pharynx and larynx which are so important in the *social engagement system*. We invite the jaw to "float free of the skull" and the skull to "float free of the neck" (Skinner 2006) as we rest or gently move on the floor. This "becomes a duet, between the autonomously floating jaw and the whole self" (Skinner 2006) and can facilitate an extraordinary sensation of freedom within freedom: freely moving one part of the self within free movement of the whole self. Such invitations in SRT are strange and sweet – there cannot be a 'right' or 'wrong' way of doing them, only playful exploration of the kinaesthetic qualities and worlds that emerge. This attention to the life of these delicate facial, aural and vocal muscles, and the dance of the "autonomy of the jaw" (Skinner 2006) represent, I suggest, time spent deftly increasing *vagal tone* and suppleness in Porges' crucial *social engagement system*.

I remember when I first encountered a deeper SRT process I was confused and perturbed by the strangely dropped jaw, and what I saw as the potentially 'gormless' facial expression that it seemed to engender, in myself, my teachers and colleagues. We seemed to have slipped entirely out of ordinary modes of connection. I now would argue that in doing so we are exploring a more natural or basic physiological state of being, which lies beneath cultural

norms, and which perhaps supports a more natural, less self-conscious, way of being. Joan Skinner's first Underlying Principle is "animal grace" (Skinner 2010). Porges has described the involuntary communication of ventral presence in the face: fleeting changes and aliveness, awareness of presence (Porges 2017:189). And Rosenberg highlights flexibility in the face as key to ventral vagal influence - especially in the area between the corners of the eyes and the corners of the mouth – not in grimaces of deliberate facial expression but subtle, delicate, involuntary movability (Rosenberg 2017:65-67). In SRT, these areas become supple with softening the muscles to widen the eyes and releasing the jaw. The odd-looking dropped jaw and head wobbles we sometimes see release-based dancers explore, are not necessarily in themselves examples of spontaneous ventral state, but as a practice they can be valuable reminders to the tissues of the *social engagement system* to loosen holding and open more deeply to their potential to embed us in and connect us to our world.

In SRT innervating the tissues of the *social engagement system* is a largely private affair. There is no pressure to engage with one another. We simply are offered time to play and come to know this experiential state on a physiological level, while in the presence of others. As we release the muscles around the eyes, and soften the upper part of the face, this is not an overtly communicative process, but practises the process of opening this system, amongst other people. It is profoundly non-threatening. We exercise the neuromuscular patterns of the *social engagement system* and allow our holding patterns – for many people in the face, jaw and muscles of the throat - to let go, without having to translate that into conscious communication and without the potential for arousal that might entail. SRT creates protected spaces for our physiology to explore new territory in the all-important ventral vagal face-heart circuit.

SRT offers then a gentle openness in the *social engagement system*, and a broadening of what and how it can manifest. Somatic dance highlights internal sensations and energetic states and is not geared towards social connection in an ordinary sense. In SRT our attention is voluminous, in a wider field of sensory awareness. We tune into, release and enliven the tissues and the muscles of the face and neck innervated by the special neural sub-circuit of the *social engagement system* with sensitive attention, but not in isolation. Just as in the "duet between the floating jaw and the whole self" (Skinner 2006) we set the softening of these tissues in relation to other parts of and the whole body, as a potential channel of autonomic and energetic life, through which we establish a sense of safety and belonging in the world. We practise "using our radar" so that we "can come close to another person without crashing into them" (Skinner 2006). As we steadily cultivate a relaxed, suspended and expanded physicality, we expand our gaze to take in more with a softened, widened seeing, present in

and not bracing against the world. With our “buoyant inner spaces”; “floating jaw”; “breath as a constant companion”; our awareness “open to the horizon”; and “our radar on” (Skinner 2006) we sense a state of safety and belonging in the space of the world and our *ventral autonomic circuit* flourishes. From here, we can take the leap of faith that I call freedom. We move toward the state of spontaneous playful action and responsiveness, quite separate from ego, and less moulded or coloured than personality, toward that Underlying Principle which Joan Skinner defines as “Playfulness – Transcendence” (Skinner 2010) which I discuss further in PART TWO. In SRT we enliven and engage the nerves and muscles of polyvagal theory’s *social engagement system* as part of our whole-bodied arriving, belonging and opening to the world.

### **SRT and Vocal Prosody**

*Prosody* - the gentle, vocal quality of varied, rhythmic intonation like that of poetry or lullaby – is a prominent aspect of *co-regulation* and establishing a sense of safety through the *social engagement system* (Porges 2011:230). It is also - though not by name - a significant element of SRT. When students are lying on the floor in a state of deep relaxation below that of ordinary consciousness, kinaesthetic images are transmitted directly to the sensory body of the student via the gentle rhythmic intonation of the teacher’s voice. The teacher uses gentle but deliberate vocal intonation to deliver the kinaesthetic information encapsulated within Skinner’s onomatopoeic, rhythmic and poetic words. In moments of rest, often following a period of some activity, first the students are guided through a checklist which supports them to soften progressively throughout the body, and then poetic images are spoken, with an invitation into movement (*image actions*) or simply to assimilate the image as an embodied imaginative experience without movement (*totalities*). A gently expressive tonal and rhythmic use of voice is of critical importance, and is specifically intended to support embodied kinaesthetic responses in the students. It is a focus of close attention in the SRT teacher training process; and a proven sensitivity both to music and to poetry is a requirement for acceptance onto the certification programme.

Porges highlights the voice as a primal cue within the ANS. He emphasises the foundational importance of *prosody* in the development of a nurturing bond between a mother and her infant - helping a new-born learn to recognise and *co-regulate* with the feeling and the sounds of safety - and in the process of a parent offering *co-regulation* to a growing child (Porges 2011:139). This underlies the atmosphere of nurturing intimacy and the *co-regulation* that is regularly achieved in SRT classes. SRT teachers understand and use *prosodic* vocal

intonation with intent and care, to help imagery communicate directly to the “tissues of the physical self” (Skinner 2006) and to stimulate processes of releasing.

Polyvagal theory reveals further, that prosodic vocal intonation serves not only to enrich the image with kinaesthetic texture as I was taught on my teacher certification programme, but will also profoundly communicate states of safety to the ANS which will be highly calming and offer active *co-regulation* in the room. *Prosody* communicates and stimulates *ventral vagal* influence in heart, lungs and muscles of the larynx and pharynx. For Porges, the gentle rise and fall of prosodic intonation conveys information about the physiological state of the speaker, and communicates welcome and support directly through *neuroception* to the deepest physiology of the listener, providing instant cues of safety (Porges 2017:91).

“The therapist’s use of positive facial expressions and prosodic voice conveys benevolent feelings...toward the patient and recruits the passive neuroceptive pathway” (Porges & Carter 2018).

The prosodic quality of the voice in SRT is important because the deliberate tonal quality of an SRT teacher’s voice can occasionally sound forced and exaggerated, although Skinner was clear that it should not be laboured and that each teacher must find their own natural poetic voice. Polyvagal theory underscores then how, indeed, if the voice were to be forced or unnatural, it would convey unsettling information to the ANS of the student. This would interfere with their ability to feel safe and connected in the moment and thus to access the freedom to expand as fully as possible into the opportunities of the class.

### **SRT, Touch and Ventral Vagal Function**

“When the nervous system is manifest in a state of safety there is a welcoming to touch, which can be used to align bodily structures and optimize autonomic function” (Rosenberg 2017: xii).

Touch plays a vital part in SRT. We do not administer the expert hands of a master body-therapist to a client but in *partner graphics* we learn to touch one another sensitively, to offer guidance through touch, and to receive new sensory information through touch. We also practice delicate self-touch to encourage softening and releasing. My research has revealed that SRT offers several specific interventions through touch which apply to important locations of ANS circuits within the body, and can be understood to support *vagal* function. I argue that Rosenberg's understanding of the ANS can inform and support the quality of these interventions in SRT towards deeper autonomic experiences of safety. And thus I'd argue too that it would be valuable for SRT teachers to have fuller understanding in this aspect of the work.

Rosenberg assimilates polyvagal theory in a highly practical way, applying its anatomy to encourage releasing in certain areas of the body. He asserts that "Optimal health is only possible when we have a well-functioning ventral branch of the vagus nerve" (Rosenberg 2017:36) and offers a number of specific exercises to access and support this as well as to release tension in the muscles and internal organs innervated by the sympathetic nerve chain in the thoracic spine. In this way Rosenberg treats physical pain, neuro-diversities, energy disorders, mental health and mood disorders which he terms the many "heads of the Hydra" all of which he believes stem from malfunction of the ANS (Rosenberg 2017: 3). All of these conditions he writes are rooted in maladapted autonomic attempts to feel safe and can be relieved by touch, self-touch and movement exercises. Rosenberg brings expertise from his primary practices of Rolfing and cranio-sacral therapy to the knowledge within polyvagal theory, guiding his work towards ANS support.

Several primary areas of attention in SRT *partner graphics* - skull, neck, ribs, thoracic spine and shoulders - Rosenberg addresses in his support of ANS function. Many of his exercises closely echo SRT graphics and I would suggest can usefully inform them regarding the ANS. His "Basic Exercise" (Rosenberg 2017:186-195) reliably encourages freedom of the breath - a constant theme in SRT, but one which is barely guided. His "Natural Face-lift" (Rosenberg 2017:212-219) supports neuro-fascial aliveness in the tissues of the face and *social engagement system*.

Touch in SRT tends to be light, delicate and clear, and aims primarily to draw attention to certain places in the body, to encourage the tissues in these places to "melt into our partner's hands" and "let go" (Skinner 2006). We use touch to encourage alignment, suspension, offer experiences of lightness or "autonomy" of parts of the body, and to "trace the energy circuits of the physical self" (Skinner 2006). Instructions regarding the quality of touch are scant in

SRT compared to many other somatic movement practices<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless in SRT there are a number of simple types of touch including: “combing” (lightly drawing just the fingertips over the skin - “the tissues”); “brushing” (a firm or light smooth brushing touch with the whole hand); “floating” (delicately supporting a part of our partner’s body to give it a sense of effortless rising); “rapidly travelling fingers” (a light, rapid dabbing of the fingertips to “awaken” tissues and stimulate a sense of tingling); “tracing” (a light smooth brushing touch of the fingertips marking circuits of energy within the body); “vibrating” (using two fingers or the whole hand to cause specific bones or parts of our partner’s body to vibrate); a simple placing of hands (resting the palms of the hands on specific areas of our partner’s body to draw attention e.g. to the movement of the breath, or a letting go, in that place) and “nudging” (a light touch with the back of the hand or the thumbs, encouraging specific tissues to soften) (Skinner 2006). There is also the clear, secure, supportive touch of the “torso suspension” where we take hold of our partner’s ribs to offer them a sense of “inner suspension” and “dynamic stillness in the torso (Skinner 2006)”.

SRT touch is not invasive and does not intend to adjust the body. It is deliberately delicate and aims to “plant seeds of awareness” (Skinner 2006). Even in *partner graphics* where we actually move parts of our partner’s body for them, it is a gentle process that listens closely for resistance or tightening and backs off appropriately. It is most effective when the receiving partner’s tissues are “awake” (Skinner 2006) – which I would suggest correlates to being supported by the state of safety and trust that Rosenberg has highlighted above, and thus able to perceive and receive the subtle information offered. SRT’s process in and out of different movement states, supports a state of openness and receptivity where we are able to absorb and make powerful use of the glimpses of new sensations offered through touch, supporting our tissues in their own ongoing process of releasing. This collaboration can be powerful. I have lasting memories of *partner graphics* where my body felt new and good ease of being: a slippery clunk as holding released within my hip and femur shifted into new alignment; a mesmerising sense of newness beneath my partner’s fluttering fingertips over the tissues of what I now know to be the *sympathetic nerve chain* between my shoulder blades.

However, the touch in SRT class can also, on occasion, feel frustratingly vague and indirect, even disturbing, in terms of the information that is being imparted. Clearly *neuroception* is at work here, expressing tension or wellbeing at a deeply physiological level, and I propose that

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<sup>10</sup> For example, in Body Mind Centring touch is focussed toward meeting and engaging specific structural layers of the body: skin, muscle, bone, fluids etc.

Rosenberg's expertise can offer useful guidance in regards to qualities of touch within SRT. Rosenberg describes how touch can support change that spreads throughout the self.

"..we work to release the typical physical characteristics and habitual emotional patterns that limit our clients, restrict their movements, and cause pain and discomfort...The result is that they can move in new ways and have greater emotional flexibility. They can liberate themselves from clichés that have previously limited their freedom of expression, and move toward a more creative and authentic version of themselves" (2017: xxiii).

This chimes with core aspects of SRT's process and principles; and with much of my own and others' experience. And in SRT we discover this for ourselves, through dance. We hang out with the "echoes" and dance the "resonance" (Skinner 2006) that remains within our bodies after touch. We allow ourselves to "be moved" (Skinner 2006). The kinaesthetic information within touch interventions and imagery are crucial to seeding the awareness that underpins this process. The sensitivity to resistance in the tissues which we are encouraged to listen for, and the pauses we are encouraged to constantly provide when offering graphics to our partners, can be understood, through Rosenberg, as working sensitively in collaboration with the ANS of our partner.

Rosenberg writes that the body must be in a state of safety in order to be able to receive the information and the invitation to change within therapeutic touch (Rosenberg 2017: xii). Using principles from biomechanical craniosacral therapy, osteopathy, and connective-tissue release from Rolfing to support ANS function, Rosenberg has created his own "hands-on myofascial release technique" which he calls Neuro-Fascial Release Technique (2017: 194). He describes the process of very gently sliding the tissues just beneath the skin in one direction or another, "testing the 'slide-ability' of the skin" (2017: 196) and noticing where there is more slowness or resistance as it returns. Then he very gently slides the skin in the direction where there was greater resistance, immediately to pause and remain there when the slightest resistance is perceived. In that pause, a spontaneous sigh or a swallow indicates that "the resistance in the skin will melt away as it releases" (Rosenberg 2017:197). This is reminiscent of the practice of sensitivity to involuntary resistance and pausing in SRT graphics. It is reminiscent also of the pause and rest at the edges of safety in Dana's movement exercises. This sensitively perceives the body's unconscious holding patterns. It creates an opportunity for Skinner's principle of "Awareness" (Skinner 2010) to occur within the ANS and gives the body the space and time to respond and re-establish itself, as evidenced in the breath, sigh, swallow or the yawn, which Rosenberg explains are direct responses to *ventral vagal activation* (Rosenberg 2017: 193-6) and which often occur while receiving graphics in SRT class. The process supports spontaneous loosening of holding at the subtlest tissue levels.

Sensitivity to resistance and the practice of a pause is a feature of several somatic movement and body-work practices that aim to highlight involuntary bodily patterning. A pause for reflection and awareness before movement is a significant feature of Alexander Technique (AT), and it is likely that Joan Skinner absorbed and adapted this from there. There is a focus on delicacy and on supporting spontaneous releasing through offering hints or glimpses to the tissues of the body. I would argue that this need not be threatened, but supported, by teachers being able to acknowledge and understand this process in greater depth, perhaps with reference to somatic body-work practices such as Rosenberg's.

The intuition, the openness and the allowing in SRT are valuable. That the onus for any experience or any change is entirely within the gift of the student, the nature of their own process, and the availability and susceptibility of their own tissues, is defining of the technique. I would argue that much of SRT's beguiling charm, and its potency, lies in this insistent principle of "Gentleness - Power" (Skinner 2010). One of the Underlying Principles is the provocative anonymous epithet "You cannot make a leaf grow by stretching it" (Skinner 2010). This is radically permissive in terms of dance training. And it is radical in Western achievement-based culture. It is defining of how vital and confronting SRT is to our accepted systems - of cause and effect, of means to ends, of endless reaching for goals and status and achievement. Nevertheless, I would suggest that there is room for clarity and strengthening in SRT, without threat to this rare and inspirational radicalism. Rosenberg is by no means 'stretching'. In several graphics there is guidance to pause while offering hints to our partner's tissues, and that it is in these pauses that we can rest and "let go a little more" (Skinner 2006). And there is a broader conceptual understanding that it is in a state of pause – with breath - that we can open and assimilate new possibilities. But this is often taught only in the vaguest terms. I would argue for addressing this more consciously and applying it with clearer understanding and in more detail at the level of touch in *graphics*.

How this is manifested in the studio is a separate and delicate question. I would not want to endanger the openness or the inherent sensory and creative freedoms that SRT protects and makes available to students. I would not suggest burdening the lightness, the sparse, poetic wording and the rhythm of the classes with scientific explanations which might jeopardise the precious "allowing" and "letting go of anticipation" that are key to SRT's "dance of life" (Skinner 2010) – themselves the harbingers and territory of freedoms. However, specific and delicate moments of touch – primarily the crucial *graphics* that relate to the skull and neck and the "nudging of the tissues just beneath the bone along the base of the skull" (Skinner 2006) - would be supported by a keener understanding of the possibilities within the touch, of myo-fascial release, and of the ANS.

## SRT, Skull Graphics, and the ANS

Encouraging softening and spaciousness of the tissues “just inside the base of the skull” (Skinner 2006) and in the back of the neck; and exploring alignment between skull and spine, are constants of SRT process, addressed repeatedly through images, *partner graphics* and *movement studies*. Students are constantly invited to “practise allowing the tissues at the base of the skull to soften and let go” and to “feel the separation” between the skull and the neck (Skinner 2006). They explore skull and neck alignment even as they spin or turn upside down – and this is related to gaze and movement of the eyes. To cultivate a “floating skull” (Skinner 2006) is fundamental, in every class. It is not co-incidence that Rosenberg highlights the importance of freedom and alignment in this area in supporting *vagal function*. Similarly, he is clear that ANS malfunction manifests significantly here. Rosenberg has developed a number of touch and movement exercises precisely to support alignment of the skull and cervical bones (particularly C1 - the *atlas*, and C2 - the *axis*); alleviate pressure on the cranial nerves; increase blood flow to the brain and support deep spontaneous breathing (2017 191-197).

“Our autonomic nervous system is constantly scanning both our external and internal environments. When everything is good, C1 and C2 come into place, and we get adequate blood flow to the brainstem. When there is dorsal vagal state, or activity of the spinal sympathetic chain, C1 and C2 rotate out of position, reducing blood flow to the origin of the five cranial nerves in the brainstem and to some areas of the brain” (Rosenberg 2017:194).

The *vagus* and four other cranial nerves which together innervate the *social engagement system* originate within the brainstem. The ventral vagus branch emerges inside the skull at the back and base of the brain, and travels through the neck to the lungs and the heart. Crucial homeostatic functions are regulated through the cranial nerves. Rosenberg tests for ventral vagal disfunction through examining muscular tension in the pharynx, and notes that when clients test positive for ventral disfunction: “I also observe that they have an upper cervical misalignment – i.e. a rotation of the vertebrae C1 and a tipping of C2 away from their optimal positions” (Rosenberg 2017:191). The alignment and relationship between skull and neck to support “autonomy of the skull” (Skinner 2006) and freedom of movement in the skull that does not habitually transfer into other areas of the body, are important aspects of the grace, suspension and alignment which we practice within SRT. Following Rosenberg, they are also fundamental to our deepest experiences of safety through the ventral vagus and cranial nerves.

The first of several *partner graphics* addressing the skull appears immediately in the first SRT class. We gently “nudge the tissues at the base of our partner’s skull” (Skinner 2006), and lightly encourage the skull to move independently, loosening its relationship to neck. Starting in the centre we trace outward towards the ears, nudging gently into the tissues under the bone at the base of the skull. Applying the insight of Rosenberg it becomes clear that in the many graphics and images for the skull and cervical vertebrae, we are softening the brainstem and the area of the three crucial nuclei of the ANS nerves; stimulating baroreceptors and increasing blood flow to the brain. We are performing *neuro-fascial release* to align the first and second cervical vertebrae, and stimulating *vagal function*.

After a similar graphic to facilitate a loosening and letting go of holding in the shoulders and encourage autonomy in the arms, the first class ends with a “trio dance of two autonomous arms and an autonomous skull” (Skinner 2006) which extends and integrates any new experience of releasing in the brainstem, neck and back muscular and connective tissue. Within the first year of my SRT practise this particular exploration framed a quite extraordinary experience, which it took several weeks for me to assimilate. After staying with this awareness for some time, some associated emotional disturbance, and revealing discussions with my mother, I eventually became certain that the image and the dance had enabled the emergence of a significant body memory from very early life. This illustrates perhaps what a significant area of the body this is in terms of both basic life function and sense of self.

Through a series of inter-related *graphics*, *image actions*, *totalities* and *movement studies* throughout the classes there is a steady progression of developing suppleness in the neck and throat, suspension and autonomy of skull, spaciousness inside the skull, and alignment between skull and neck, carried through into expansive and complex movement. SRT offers delicate interventions both through touch and through imaginative experiences, while it also supports free play and exploration in movement, in a light and easeful way. I would argue that this combination is unusually able to unravel deeply buried patterning in the nervous system and in the fascia and muscles it innervates, towards vital states of safety.

Various SRT images extend from the base of the skull. Space opening inside the skull extends into an “axial line”, then an “axial shadow” running through the physical self (Skinner 2006). Across a number of classes this softens and melds into the “window-like spaces along the spine” eventually forming a continuous “shaft of space” running through the centre of the whole self which “bends and moves with us”; or which “moves us” (Skinner 2006). This experience of a gathering core remains for me one of the most compelling gifts of SRT. It grounds, aligns and anchors; and ultimately supports the dissolving of the self into space and energy. Images

of strings suspending the skull; “gossamer threads” connecting the hands; an “electrical pulse” that “tingles” along the spinal column; and the “axial shadow” (Skinner 2006), build a vital and cohering core which can move through space and spread through multi-directional alignment. This coherence and yet openness is a joyful experience of freedom. Underpinned by the detail and guidance Rosenberg offers towards supporting cranial nerve function, SRT can be understood to potently frame and facilitate its further layer of becoming. Joan Skinner’s Underlying Principles (Skinner 2010) make it clear that SRT has never been about simply providing the dancer with more functional technical skills. SRT enables essences of consciousness to resonate through the dance. It facilitates transcendent experiences of “opening the channel to life force”, “aligning beyond the self” and “becoming transparent” (Skinner 2010).

I would suggest then that there is value in more understanding and detail regarding the quality of touch and the physiology of partner graphics in SRT, especially as the work passes into the hands of successive generations. I appreciated the curiousness and blandness of many of the instructions for *graphics* when I began my own SRT journey, allowing my system to respond in any way it liked, or not at all. This radically honours the multi-layered, interconnected “web-likeness” of the “physical self” and of the unpredictable process of releasing (Skinner 2010); and it set me on a journey of innocent adventure, free of goals or striving. This is the “un-instrumentalised” essence of kinaesthetic experience that Alexander eloquently argues for (Alexander 2017:4); which is increasingly rare in our culture and whose disappearance would be tragic. Where there is sensitivity, gentleness and “suppleness” (Skinner 2006), there is a chance of life and change. Nevertheless, once a releasing process had taken hold within my tissues and begun etching its own pathways of unfurling, I am clear that it was not threatened by understanding, and that the skilful, knowing touch I have received in other contexts (such as Rolfing and craniosacral therapy) served only to heighten and support this. SRT process persists valiantly through an ever evolving experience of imagery and practice. I would argue then that, once established, SRT process is robust enough, and its states and experiences so palpable, that knowledge cannot hurt them. And that any application of this material in therapeutic contexts or with vulnerable populations would benefit from strengthening knowledge and skill around the teaching and support of touch.

### **SRT, Breath and the ANS**

Similarly, I would argue that Rosenberg’s expertise can usefully inform SRT’s approach to breath – another staple of ANS function. Skinner has described how the pursuit of more natural and resourcing breathing patterns was an inspiration of SRT and of her adoption of the

fundamental premise of softening. “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” (Neuhaus 2014:2). In SRT “autonomy of the breath” or “freedom of the breath” (Skinner 2006) is understood to support energy and movement. “Freeing the breath” is repeatedly urged, and dedicated space for “breath awareness” and allowing the breath to “deepen into the torso and back” (Skinner 2006) is built into every class, before and after *checklists*. We practice moving while allowing the breath to move on its own, and imagine “our breath as a constant companion” (Skinner 2006).

Porges emphasises the profound connection between breath and *vagal function* (2011:43), via the significant influence of the vagus upon the bronchi. Both Dana and - in greater detail - Rosenberg, offer practices of slowing and deepening the breath as effective pathways to access and encourage parasympathetic influence, or ventral states. Rosenberg’s “diaphragmatic breathing” (2017:101-102) offers understanding and detail which can support Skinner’s more general invitation to “let go of the breath” or “allow the breath to deepen into the torso” (Skinner 2006). I would suggest that this is an area that is under-served in the technique in terms of detailed knowledge and instruction. Although we are constantly encouraged to “allow the breath to move on its own” (Skinner 2006), and classes provide time - often with powerfully poetic language – in which we are invited to sense the breath, or to “float in the sea of breath”, there is only one partner graphic which directly addresses and supports our breathing. This is beautifully minimal, and consists of a gentle laying of hands on our partner’s back as they simply rest, face down, on the floor. There is intimacy and gentleness in the act, and there can be a potent energetic exchange. Porges’ notions of *neuroception* and *co-regulation* illuminate this intuitive and implicit aspect of SRT. After a while the breath invariably deepens and softens. With sheer attention, breath seems to settle. There are beautiful images for the breath in SRT, “moving on its own” deep inside us. Nevertheless, there is an absence of guidance regarding how we are to practise “letting go of the breath” while moving with “inner suspension” and “multi-directional alignment” (Skinner 2006) for example.

Polyvagal theory affirms that in physiological reality Skinner is right. “Autonomous breath” (Skinner 2006) occurs within and supports ventral innervation and optimal heart rate. It is through a new, spontaneous breath – an involuntary yawn or sigh – that Rosenberg identifies a positive shift towards ventral activation in both his “Basic Exercise” (Rosenberg 2017:186-90) and his “Neuro-Fascial Release Technique” (Rosenberg 2017:195-99). And Rosenberg carefully teaches “diaphragmatic breathing” (Rosenberg 2017:101-2). For those with naturally well-functioning breathing patterns, Skinner’s simple and minimal reminders to “let go of the

breath” will be enough to sustain optimal function, and efficiently recruit *vagal tone*. But for the many - including myself - with a tendency to asthma, with maladapted habits of shallow breathing, or even misguidedly learned habits of “belly breathing” as Rosenberg bemoans (Rosenberg 2017:101); more guidance and intervention would be useful. Drawing on Rosenberg, this can be supported and further explored within the practise of “sighing” that appears in SRT, in the moments of dedicated breath awareness, around *checklists* and within *graphics*, in order to offer richer experiential support that can then be drawn on further as we dance.

### **SRT and Processes of Moving Through Autonomic States**

Polyvagal theory states that with appropriate *neuroceptive* cues, we can be encouraged to sense and respond to signals of safety, to move up through the *hierarchy* of states and so restore optimal homeostatic, social and psychological outcomes. I propose that SRT not only enables effective access to the autonomic states, engaging ventral support for qualities of safety and freedom, but that it etches viable and efficient routes of transition between the states and their different autonomic conditions of arousal and composure.

Changes in autonomic state require and induce myriad physiological, mental and emotional adjustments. If such changes within the ANS are sudden and dramatic, or frequently experienced, or if we have a tendency to become stuck in one of the more challenging states, moving between them can be perilously draining to the system. As a somatic dancer, and someone who lives in constant awareness of shifting physical and emotional embodied states, I am well acquainted with these shifts and the energy they can consume. I propose that SRT is exceptional in reliably combining the freedom of spontaneous movement with a sense of peaceful ease and sustainable energy. That sense of ease occurs through the organ function and homeostasis the ANS preserves; and SRT frames access to that. I argue that SRT provides and practises ways to inhabit and shift between the states with minimal expenditure of energy, and that this is of great value to human function. SRT facilitates this shift primarily through its highlighting of kinaesthetic sensitivity set in motion and inviting change, through its numerous interventions and invitations.

All SRT classes are designed to incorporate different energetic states along a spectrum from deep rest to vigorous movement and every class facilitates at least one transition between deep stillness and expansive, energetic movement. Students are carefully guided through energetic shifts and travel “effortlessly” (Skinner 2006) between sometimes extremes of energetic state. Invited in the first class to explore the possibility of “moving with a different

kind of effort” as we roll gently on the floor, we gradually discover the mysterious salvation of moving with “effortless effort” (Skinner 2006). We find that energy flows freely and that we can easily ride its wave as we move out of the ground and into the air, between expansive powerful movement and stillness. Nurturing kinaesthetic awareness and repeatedly facilitating the emergence and expression of pre-conscious agential desires in the tissues of the body to mobilize or immobilize, I suggest that in each class students are artfully laying down and strengthening the neural pathways and developing the energetic and neuromuscular flows to easily and naturally enable Dana’s process of navigating the autonomic states.

In its multi-stranded guidance to awakening embodied sensation, combining immersive imaginative process with the intervention of touch and creative play, SRT offers a uniquely rich and effective method to sensorially perceive the state of body tissue and playfully facilitate and allow processes of transformation which cognitive understanding or intention are not be able to achieve. Joan Skinner writes simply, from her own experience, and from the close observation of her students: “allow change to occur in the physical self” (Skinner 2010).

Our ANS is constantly scanning for danger or disturbance and we become activated continuously in small ways, not only in response to genuinely threatening situations, but in response to the daily demands and irritants of our lives and culture. Some of us are more resilient and adept at negotiating the inevitable triggers and stressors of life and at self-regulating the autonomic states that result from them. Dana describes how we constantly travel through activation and deactivation of all of the states – ventral, sympathetic and dorsal - multiple times a day, and her psychotherapeutic treatment method is based around nurturing the ability to recognise and understand this process; teaching us to track and befriend our individual nervous system patterns and increasingly find ways to orient ourselves and navigate through physiological and emotional states. Dana refers to an “autonomic ladder” (Dana 2018:9) of Porges’ three major states, ordered according to their evolutionary *hierarchy*. She works to help her mental health clients learn ways to recognise and “climb the ladder” from dorsal states of severe depression, through sympathetic arousal, and eventually back to ventral (Dana 2018:10-11). Learning this is challenging, painstaking and requires both energy and rest. I would argue that Dana’s description of this process echoes and informs a similar progression from profound immobilization through increasing motion to open and expansive dancing is delicately offered, lightened and supported within each SRT class. Skinner’s notion and practical invocation of “effortless effort” (Skinner 2006) is instrumental in this.

Dana acknowledges that moving through autonomic states is far from straightforward, especially for those with deeply ingrained maladapted autonomic patterning; and that it is not

a cognitive process. Dana is clear that when she begins working with a new psychotherapy client she requires first of all an introduction to the particular physiological rhythms and colours of their nervous system, rather than needing to hear their story. Porges has highlighted that personal narratives are often created in order to make sense of bewildering feelings, rather than the other way around, and Dana explains that a client's story told from a sympathetic or dorsal state will not be as balanced or useful as one which emerges later, from a ventral state (Sunseri, Dana 2019). Joan Skinner's approach to dance also quite deliberately does away with any kind of interpretation or meaning-making. SRT is notoriously opaque, and studiously avoids anatomical explanation, stylistic or interpretative comment, and roundly discourages any kind of self-conscious personal expression or habituated trappings of identity. In her *Underlying Principles*, Skinner writes that "the technique cultivates a transcendence of the self-image"; and calls for "a high degree of consciousness – without self-consciousness" (Skinner 2010). Through its poetic images and partner graphics SRT privileges vivid sensory awareness of the experiential realities and possibilities of our body; an awareness of the sensory qualities of the world around us; and invites us to move as simply as possible with and through these combined inner and outer worlds. Like Dana's process, SRT also frames a space where memory and association naturally float in and out of our awareness, as feeling states, even perhaps as new thoughts or ideas. These may be spilled and looked at in the free writing and drawing which are an important moment at the end of each class. Building on polyvagal theory, Dana too then works primarily and directly with a client's sensorial experience of the ANS, purposefully helping them develop the skills to foreground and recognise their physiological states and gradually empowering them to move up through the *hierarchy* - from the *dissociation* or *immobilization* which causes many people to arrive in a psychotherapist's consulting room, through *mobilization*, into the alert engagement and playful curiosity of *ventral vagal activation*.

Dana writes that "the experience of re-patterning the nervous system is one of transition. Before no longer feels true, but after has not quite made itself known" (Dana 2018:176). This visceral experience of transition is a constant in SRT. An experience of disorientation is acknowledged and held within the "web-like" (Skinner 2010) process which constantly disentangles and reconnects. Interestingly, in SRT this sometimes palpable and dizzying sense of disorientation is rarely attached to feelings of fear. I would argue that there is a constancy of *co-regulation* and *vagal tone* made possible by SRT that keeps us within the realms of safety; that keeps us forever exploring new possibilities of freedom within the tissues. We occasionally approach the edges of safety but we have developed practices, from the very first class, of encountering them gently, of enjoying them, and we have practised our routes of melting back from them when necessary.

“Working through an autonomic lens, therapists support their clients in tolerating ‘being between’ and help to resource the new states while giving their clients’ new stories time and space to take shape” (Dana 2018:177).

A quality of constantly being between states occurs in SRT in minute sensorial detail, as new physical relationships within the self and new forms or directions of movement, however tiny, are coaxed forward and given time and permission to emerge.

Dana asserts that “in order to be able to access and work with neuroceptive information, we need to bring active perception to it” (Sunseri, Dana 2019). I would argue that bringing active perception to – i.e. becoming conscious of, feeling, recognising and engaging with - neuroceptive and other embodied information is a skill that SRT inherently develops. “The technique plants seeds of awareness” and “awareness is the first step to change” (Skinner 2010). SRT fundamentally teaches and practices processes of change in our unconscious bodily states through “kinaesthetic awareness” (Skinner 2006) i.e. detailed and lucid perception of potentially obscure felt states, brought alive through touch and imagery, and invited to surface into acknowledgement and action, in imagination, movement, writing and drawing. This is the primary way in which SRT raises and articulates the principle of the “intelligence of the physical self” (Skinner 2010), and which skills us to negotiate delicate autonomic responses.

SRT interlaces a constant awareness of felt sense with gentle and supportive touch, with deep rest, with music and with movement. SRT nurtures not only the recognition of felt states, but facilitates playful, spontaneous and active exploration of them, often representing new instances of agency and creative presence. Through the sensing, the unfurling and the mapping of these awarenesses we become experts in our own revelation. Dana’s description of the complexity of transitioning between autonomic states, and the necessity for active perception and intervention into neuroceptive circuits, is artfully practised by the way that SRT classes lead the student in and out of movement and stillness (up and down the autonomic ladder), seemingly without effort or conscious choice, but through gentle stimuli (imagery, voice and touch), stirring the tissues of the self to enact their own desires of transformation. We practise to “allow an image to transform the whole self” (Skinner 2006). We practise simply allowing movement to happen; and allowing movement not to happen. We practise allowing the body to contract or expand in its own time and on its own terms. We come into contact with our body’s deep desires to stretch, to roll, to bounce, to curl in upon itself, or simply to melt a little and breathe. We learn to allow, accept and feel at home with these physical needs and to loosen subtle constrictions around them.

We become highly skilled in encountering and navigating the tightening or defensive ANS reactions such as those that may arise when transitioning from the safety of private internal states towards more public ones. For example, SRT process tends initially to facilitate a slowing, settling and turning inward which can over time become very comforting and reassuring. One becomes aware of one's "inner landscape" (Skinner 2006) in a new way, and often that invitation and the possibility to close eyes and venture inwards - which occurs in every class - takes strong hold. Once a student has accepted and adopted this and found the freedom that it offers to expand and change one's experience of one's own interior physicality, it can feel quite challenging to begin to explore moving again with eyes open and to address the question of presence in space and amongst others. Maintaining that feeling of safety as students are encouraged increasingly to arrive and move in awareness of the world around them is highly delicate. From the blissful state of ease and expansion that can be found in the softness and the melting of for example "rolling and rising" or "being danced" (Skinner 2006) with eyes closed, or of resting with a sense of dissolving into a totality, it can be challenging to open our eyes and rise to our feet; more so to shift into expansive movement or travelling, to respond and play into the energetic realities of the world around us. There can be a sense of panic or resistance that threatens our inner space and buoyancy.

At these moments our *neuroception* – even if it has not developed maladapted defensive habits - has the potential to limit us, cause subtle contraction and restraint on our sense of freedom, on our movement, and on our ability to interact with the world around us. The time spent carefully exercising the muscles of the social engagement system guide and support this transition, allowing us to maintain states of inner spaciousness and security as we move into presence and interaction. We practice a way of being in the world which involves a state of "shifting awarenesses" (Skinner 2006) noticing the feelings and sensations that arise, while continuously drawing on and feeling into the buoyancy, suspension and multi-directional alignment that we have practised. We stay alert and alive to the state of things, both within our physical interior and outside of us, and have resources to call on.

### **SRT and Shifting out of Immobilization through Sympathetic Arousal**

Dana has cited the particular challenge of shifting out of the limp state of dorsal shutdown towards a more aroused and engaged state of being. Porges' *hierarchy* means that from *dorsal immobilization* we need to pass through a state of *sympathetic arousal* and renewed *mobilization* – to restart the engine as it were. SRT offers and practises an ease in this transition, through its permissiveness and patience. Students are not rushed to move out of

deep states and into *image actions* for example. They are invited, and given time. And importantly, they are carried on a wave of non-cognitive kinaesthetic awareness which gradually asserts itself, and finds itself in movement.

Crucially, we are permitted not to venture forth if this doesn't naturally emerge. We can retreat through "melting" (Skinner 2006) back into the floor and into rest if that is what our tissues - innervated more or less by different fronds of the afferent and efferent fibres of our ANS - want and need. In the very first class, we practise "melting into rolling and melting into rising, perhaps all the way onto our feet" (Skinner 2006). "Melting", both in retreat and into advance, is a resource we learn and can draw upon at any time.

SRT's process of enacting the delicate upward journey from *immobilization* to motion, is also informed by Peter Levine's analysis of the embodiment of trauma in his therapeutic practice Somatic Experiencing™ (SE) (Levine 2009). Levine describes trauma as a chronic holding in the body: the result of a process where threat has been overwhelming and inescapable; and where progression through the ANS from a *dorsal freeze state* to *sympathetic mobilization* has been interrupted and become stuck. There has been a surge of defensive *sympathetic arousal* in an attempt to fight back or to escape, suddenly immobilized in the realization or the moment of overwhelm. This, Levine maintains, leads to a condition where sympathetic arousal remains trapped in the ANS, limiting our ability to move and respond to the world in a state of safety, and also limiting our ability to perceive and feel safety, even in the absence of threat. The pent-up energy of this unsuccessful mobilization remains in the body as chronic unconscious tension and must be physically discharged in order for the individual to return to a more functional state of being (Levine 2010:39-41), and to enable innervation of the ventral vagal pathways. For Levine, via his study of the physiological behaviour of animals, this consists primarily in a process of shaking, trembling and quivering (2010:15-17). He warns that the release of the trapped energy and feelings can be explosive and potentially re-traumatising, and SE addresses this process with deliberation and care. SE employs a methodology of *titration* - whereby the client is invited very gradually to "touch into" the sensations lying in their system - and *pendulation* – moving gently back and forth between a state of arousal and a feeling of safety (2010: 78-82).

SRT seems intuitively to understand this process and to frame it safely for us. Joan Skinner has said that releasing "is like a trap springing open. It's a releasing of blocks and therefore a releasing of energy and power" (Skinner 1996 in Valencia & Bell 2016). SRT frames several movement studies that involve "quivering" (Skinner 2006). When this first arises in the class series, it is very light and playful. We explore and play with the notion of "whispering tissues"

that are “delicate, active and very alive” (Skinner 2006). There is no hint of trauma in it, and yet it reaches into and innervates our tissues in a delicate quiver that is beguiling and stealthily releasing. In later *image actions* we explicitly explore “quivering” in different parts of and the whole body, and allow light or vigorous shaking to “take us somewhere” in a dance of “loose bones” or “quivering tissues” (Skinner 2006). These have been extraordinary experiences for me. I feel myself letting go and releasing barely conscious stickiness and holding in my body, on deeper and deeper levels every time I return to this. It oscillates between semi-conscious action, playfully experimenting with shaking and quivering; and a strangely self-generating and powerful shudder in which I sense a surge of energy coming forth spontaneously from somewhere deep inside me. Levine has described the surge of deep energy released from the system as “waking the tiger”, and he describes how there is very often an essential spontaneous gesture or movement which emerges through this process (Levine 2011:23). In SRT, this energy then has somewhere creative to go – directly into the dance, into vital movement. We ride on and extend this energy into space, explore its edges and its possibilities.

I would argue too, that SRT offers these experiences of shifting towards mobilization from deep inside the ANS, in a skilfully paced frame of both *titration* and *pendulation*. Releasing energy is *titrated* through the gentle progressions in intensity offered by the coherent progressions in imagery and graphics, slowly building up through the series of classes. And an effective *pendulation* is framed in the rise and fall between the striking encounters with the unknown that can occur through graphics, in the *image actions* and *totalities* and the coming gently back to ventral in the integrative dances that always follow these.

Every SRT class leads us through opportunities for high energy moving gently into rest and stillness; and vice versa, sometimes from a place that feels almost lifeless we transition gently towards motion and connection and arrival in the space and group and world. We enact the journey with exquisite attention and respect for the detail of felt experiences of the tissue and the energy the “physical self”.

### **SRT and the Vagal Brake**

Autonomic mobilization can be reduced or increased by a process Porges calls the *vagal brake* whereby the parasympathetic *vagus nerve* interacts with and mitigates sympathetic arousal. “The vagal brake provides a neural mechanism to change visceral states by slowing

or speeding heart rate” (Porges 2011: 229). Innervation of the myelinated<sup>11</sup> *ventral vagus* branch has the capacity to act as a brake on the heart’s pacemaker and thus support relaxation by slowing heart rate and dampening activity in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. This signals to and encourages the ANS to inhibit sympathetic arousal and is extremely useful to humans, minimising defensive reactions, maximising opportunities for productive interaction with others, while also saving the energy expenditure of moving in and out of states of arousal and their accompanying emotions (Porges 2011:103). When additional mobilization is required, or in response to threat, the vagal brake is released (Porges 2011:116).

“Neurophysiologically, the influence of the vagal brake is reduced or removed to support the metabolic requirements for mobilization (fight-or-flight behaviours) and maintained or increased to support social engagement behaviours” (Porges 2011:229).

Developing function of the *vagal brake* would thus be of real value, particularly for those with habitually maladapted responses, and I suggest that SRT exercises and supports the vagal brake, key to processes of autonomic self-regulation. Dana describes how we can access the vagal brake in moments of arousal by recalling a favoured “ventral anchor” or resting posture to offer “nuances of quiet, deep relaxation, and peaceful stillness shaped by an active vagal brake” (2018:159). As previously described, SRT classes are long – two hours or more - and have a rhythm of activity and rest. I suggest that in this rhythm the vagal brake is recruited to maintain a sense of calm engagement as we move in and out of mobilization. Imagery – for example of “a nest of sea sponges within the deep space of the solar plexus” (Skinner 2006) - act as “ventral vagal anchors”, calming and supporting us as we move. In SRT’s quality of “effortlessness” and the efficiency and resource for easeful movement within that, we maintain live access to the vagal brake while moving across different dynamic ranges, heart rate increasing and decreasing as required in the unfolding dance. My experience is that in “moving with effortless effort”; and practising “suppleness as readiness” (Skinner 2006) I am able to transition between and combine states of high mobilization and calm presence. I am able to slip in and out of energetic movement with simplicity and ease, sometimes sensing waves of emotional light or shade as I travel, but without becoming exhausted or stalled in the process. (And in SRT – if I were to become stalled or exhausted, I would have the space, the time and the invitation, to succumb to and stay with that, until it naturally shifted.) I would suggest that my vagal brake is functioning exceptionally well in this context, tempering excessive sympathetic activation and allowing me to remain present and connected as I draw on mobilizing forces. I feel resourced and relaxed, and easily responsive to different impulses.

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<sup>11</sup> The vagal nerve fibres connecting to the heart within the most evolutionarily advanced ventral circuit are myelinated, i.e. coated in an insulating layer of the fatty tissue myelin, making them capable of faster and more complex regulatory function than the more primitive dorsal nerve circuits (Porges 2017:5).

Porges endorses various alternative, complementary and integrative medicine (ACIM) methodologies in terms of supporting vagal function in the ANS, and acknowledges especially two ways that we are able to voluntarily support influence of the vagal brake upon the heart: through deliberately shifting breath patterns and changing posture (Porges, Carter2017b). In SRT we constantly and actively observe “freeing the breath” (skinner 2006), and practise “effortless” major posture changes, between lying on the floor, standing and travelling through space, while cultivating a state of easeful readiness - “suppleness as readiness” – for movement (Skinner 2006). Changes in position and the energy expended are creatively supported by breath; by vocal sounding; by “melting” the tissues of the body and stimulating the body’s natural tensegrity and core strength. More playful, open, and creative than ACIM exercises; I argue that not only does SRT in this way support a constant gentle engagement of the *vagal brake* to practise interaction between *sympathetic arousal* and *vagal regulation*, but it does so in dance - a playful and poetic state which supports profound experiences of permission, creative expression, of freedom, desire and agency.

### **SRT and Dancing Interventions into Autonomic Processes**

SRT frames many helpful somatic interventions into ANS function through touch, breath, alignment and awareness and, crucially, sets these into motion through immersive kinaesthetic imagery in *totalities*, in “being moved” or “being danced” (Skinner 2006) in altered states of consciousness in *image actions*. New sensations are explored within playful and sometimes trance-like experimental dances, where students allow themselves spontaneously to follow and embody emerging forms and rhythms. And I argue that this engages and enables a further dimension of creative freedom. These experiences, this state of dance, and this level of creative freedom is applicable and available through SRT to all bodies, not only those of professional dancers, or recreational dancers, not only healthy or abled bodies, but to anyone who is intrigued by and open to embodied awareness and the natural rhythms of kinaesthetic sensibility.

“The Skinner Releasing Technique has, at its core, the premise that everyone is endowed with a natural, primal grace, an animal-like grace. Releasing connects us into that grace” (Skinner 2010).

I would compare that animal-like state of grace to Porges’ pinnacle of mammalian evolution, an animal-like *ventral state* of relaxed openness and preparedness to interact with the flows of life. Not only does SRT offer expertise, practical tools, and stealthy, creative processes for encouraging our bodily tissues into vital experiences of safety through an optimal state of

being in the ANS, but SRT takes us further than this. In SRT, that embodied experiential state of safety is already - and has the constant opportunity to extend more fully into - a playful, responsive and creative state of dance, in live engagement with the moment and with space. As Skinner's first principle is "Grace", so her last is "The Dance of Life".

"When the technique taps into the primal grace of the individual, the movement becomes aesthetic. All movement has its own rhythm and musicality, rhythm pertaining to function rather than to time. The Skinner Releasing Technique is poetic. It is holographic. ...The technique involves releasing into Process – process that is not a means to an end but an end in itself – the dance of life" (Skinner 2010).

SRT recognises, champions and frames a subtle but important shift: from simply feeling safe enough to be present and to move, into a state of vibrancy which is aesthetic, poetic and self-defining. In SRT it is understood that this becomes possible only and after we have practised and absorbed palpable physiological processes of letting go hidden defences; of building inner structures of alignment, fluidity and resilience; of becoming "soft", "spongey" and "buoyant" (Skinner 2006); of opening inner and outer awareness, and allowing change and movement to occur. These felt states and qualities are systematically introduced, practised and developed, and when they have become absorbed into our instinctive habits of being, the "dance of life" (Skinner 2010) occurs. When this happens there is a sense of safety and of freedom that coincides with polyvagal theory's description of the ANS in ventral "safe and social" (Dana 2018: 26) mode. I argue that SRT supports ANS function as it carefully prepares us for this secure and expansive state of being; so that we can enter the meaningful, creative state of dance which SRT defines.

I set this spontaneous and self-fulfilling creativity within a spectrum of different levels of agency that become imaginable within Eric Fromm's positive notion of spontaneous agency, of "freedom to" (Fromm 1942:26). I have experienced, and have witnessed, a joyful, wild and elemental, yet purposeful and strangely decisive freedom in dancing within the frames of SRT. It is a freedom which asserts itself with my permission and my humble collaboration and compliance, rather than my intent or my design.

SRT process provides access to the physiology of the optimal autonomic state which makes this possible. Following Porges, this effectively serves human wellbeing. And I would argue that SRT offers a level of understanding and access to kinaesthetic experience; a richness of creative sensory pathways able to stimulate autonomic function, which the practical, trauma-focussed therapeutic systems I have researched may not necessarily realize. Taking the student into creative realms encourages the tissues and the fibres of the ANS - and the flesh

that they innervate - into active, rhythmic life bypassing and relieving the self-conscious or cognitive self.

Therapists recognise the potential here and are already reaching towards it. In her most recent book Dana addresses the power of attending to nature, to music, and of inviting the body into movement (each of these are intrinsic to SRT) to stimulate and support improved autonomic function. Dana presents specific exercises through these pathways, and encourages the client to build up a bank of images and feeling states that can become increasingly known and available, that can be recruited to help shift and support them into a *ventral state*. SRT process involves just such a building up of inner resources, and spills them naturally into creative play and expression.

## PART TWO

### SRT and the Creative Potential of Composite Autonomic Responses

PART TWO addresses more complex interactions of autonomic states; applying the sensitive responses of the *vagal brake* and the conditions Porges has identified as *hybrid autonomic states* - combining elements of sympathetic and parasympathetic innervation, and combining the two different *dorsal and ventral vagal circuits*. These sophisticated and sensitive ANS responses are able to support some of the most meaningful and creative experiences of flourishing human life such as creative play, intimacy and awe. These states require, and express, both safety and freedom, and I argue are efficiently nurtured within SRT.

### SRT and the Hybrid States

Beyond the *vagal brake*, polyvagal theory crucially recognises the fertile territory of *hybrid autonomic states* that can encompass processes and effects of both *mobilization* and *immobilization*; and combine defensive autonomic responses with the calming influence of the *ventral vagus* (2018:178-91). Certainly from my own experience I am aware that the three basic autonomic states as defined do not offer an accurate picture of the many rich and complex states of being, and the flickering spaces between them, which I commonly discern in dance, and in life. And it is here that I propose that SRT – indeed all somatic movement practice – is especially pertinent in supporting autonomic function. I argue that it is in the notion of *hybrid autonomic states* that polyvagal theory really resonates with the knowledge and experience of somatic dance. Somatic dance is well averse in sifting through and distilling the murkiness of embodied sensations, and in SRT we channel this particularly effectively and purposefully, in varying states of consciousness, towards new possibilities of inhabiting both self and world.

I posit that SRT frames a special kind of connecting into autonomic function that combines and overlays aspects of the different states, and which develops our capacity to draw on and apply them. This facilitates the “suppleness as readiness” (Skinner 2006) for any kind of movement - or for stillness - at any time. This lies beneath and supports the simple, compelling spontaneity, and the inner “dynamic stillness” (Skinner 2006) which we learn to embody. We can shift between and combine the resources of one state with the resources of another in the most efficient way, dampening reactivity and defensiveness. SRT sets us in close and collaborative relationship with the ANS so that at all times we have ready access to the *vagal brake* and the steadying and enlivening influence of the *ventral vagus*; as well as to the ‘accelerator’ of sympathetic engagement and all the energy, the speed and activity that

represents. SRT frames privileged access to hybrid autonomic states and thus develops skills of playfulness and tenderness to optimise their richness and potential. In this richness lies a joyful combination of safety and of freedom.

Further, I would argue that SRT practices archetypal hybrid states with great sensitivity and poeticism, exploring and revealing them in highly textured and artistic ways. Both Rosenberg and Dana highlight the power and the challenge of the hybrid (Dana calls them “inter-twined”) states, explaining that they represent sophisticated autonomic processes which can support fulfilling engagement with some of life’s most inspired and inspiring moments. The hybrid states require a high-level level of ANS function.

“For many clients, the experiences that require co-operation between states bring an intensity that is too great a challenge for their nervous system to meet. When the autonomic ability to blend states is limited, our clients miss the richness of play, the tenderness of intimacy, and the inspiration of awe and elevation” (Dana 2018:178)

The precious primary experiences Dana cites here, are made possible by a combination of embodied states of both safety and freedom within the ANS. They combine the freedom to act, or not to act (mobilization or immobilization) with the absence of fear (ventral calm and openness). They combine safety with freedom. I maintain that SRT frames processes and opportunities to practise the especially productive hybrid states, expanding our physiological and other capacities to flourish.

### **Mobilization without Fear - Play and Playfulness in SRT**

“Play is a blend of two autonomic states made possible when ventral vagal social engagement and sympathetic mobilization work together” (Porges 2009, in Dana 2018:179).

Play combines a sense of safety and belonging with the ability to interact and respond with an attitude of fun and flexibility that is fundamentally autonomic. Porges has defined play as a vital “neural exercise” in which the ANS supports safe and social interactions combined with energised activity. For Porges, play - especially “rough and tumble play... shares with the defensive fight or flight mechanisms a neurophysiological substrate that functionally increases metabolic output by increasing sympathetic excitation” (Porges 2011:276). Meanwhile the *social engagement system* supports a sense of safety and belonging. “Play only occurs when one is safe, secure and feeling good” (Panksepp & Biven 2012 in Dana 2018:179). Play is *mobilization without fear*. It is a combination of sympathetic arousal and pro-social behaviour, supported by sophisticated application of the *vagal brake*. “The vagal brake relaxes, allowing

the sympathetic mobilization of play, and then reengages before the mobilization turns from play into protection.” (Dana 2018:179)

In SRT we learn to move and dance and fundamentally to inhabit our bodies without limiting defensiveness. For Skinner: “The play instinct is at the heart of the creative act” (Skinner 2010). “Playfulness - Transcendence” is an Underlying Principle of SRT, and one of the basic invitations through which students explore any new awareness. We “play with an image, or let it play with us” (Skinner 2006). We “cultivate playfulness – a light hearted approach” (Skinner 2010) in our physicality, and in our relationship to sensation, to imagery, to other dancers, and to ourselves. We play and become comfortable with an attitude of lightness in unpredictability, before we then explore with a partner, where another layer of fun and variability emerges. We practise lightness and responsiveness in our attitude as well as in our physicality.

In playful dancing, or “playing with an image”, and further, in “letting an image play with us”, we are recruiting *mobilization without fear* to support energetic, expansive and free flowing movement. Through this hybrid autonomic function we can move and dance with more trust, abandon and experimentation, with more freedom. This invitation towards experimentation, perhaps taking us beyond our known physical skills, is often less helpfully referred to in traditional dance training as ‘embracing risk’. Intended to develop new skills and to enhance our performance capability, this lacks the autonomic sense of safety (indeed implies potential danger) that is embedded in the quality of play which SRT teaches and practices so carefully and consistently. And thus, I would argue, is less likely to produce compelling or freeing movement. In the gentleness and permissiveness of SRT, experimentation is not pushed, while resources for mobilization can spontaneously occur within altered states of consciousness and move the body in new and remarkable ways. We practise a remarkably full-bodied, sensorially alive and intrepid experience of movement.

Further, I would suggest that SRT’s playfulness encompasses and extends the systematic, rules-based play that Porges describes, requiring “synchronous and reciprocal behaviours between individuals” (Porges 2017:22). For Joan Skinner playfulness is an aspect of transcendence of self. When we “let an image play with us” or find ourselves moving with awareness of a partner, we extend ourselves. We cultivate playfulness to discover “a high degree of consciousness, without self-consciousness” (Skinner 2010). Playfulness removes self-judgement as less hangs upon our choices. Gestures and motions become contributions to and of the moment, emerging as instances of energetic form with their own resonance, as opposed to intended constructs. And thus we slip beneath our own habitual veneer of identity: “SRT does not foster personality”. In playfulness we “cultivate a transcendence of self-image

– to reveal the true uniqueness of the self” (Skinner 2010). We practice playfulness as a way of being lightly in and with the world, experimenting with possibilities of being, and – vitally - as a way of not judging ourselves, or others. This *neural exercise* practices a sense of safety also in terms of self-esteem and compassion towards oneself. We apply a sense of lightness to ourselves, reduce self-consciousness and judgement, give ourselves a little more room to be and move.

### **Immobilization without Fear – Stillness, Intimacy and Awe in SRT**

The ability to sense and be gently and calmly with a state of immobilization is as fundamental to SRT as the ability to sense, allow and ride authentic waves of motion. In Skinner’s final and far-reaching Underlying Principle “The Dance of Life”: “everything in motion is seen as dance – even stillness” (Skinner 2010).

Several movement studies and images involve developing qualities of stillness. And the stillness which may be cultivated over time in SRT is powerfully resonant and compelling. It can appear almost reptilian in its motionlessness. I argue that it connects us to an evolutionarily older state of being - to the oldest part of our nervous system - and makes compelling use of our autonomic hierarchy. But this stillness is not closed or constricted. Embodying another dimension of Skinner’s “animal grace” (Skinner 2010), it is not a state that has shut off aliveness and awareness. It is simply still. The breath is “exquisitely soft” (Skinner 2006). In polyvagal terms, essential metabolic state is powered right down, yet systems of presence and connection remain functioning. It is an exemplary hybrid autonomic state of *immobilization without fear* (Porges 2011:172). This quality of relaxed stillness recruits the primitive *dorsal vagal circuit* in co-operation with the *ventral circuit*. “The ability to immobilize without activating the fear response is dependent upon the oldest and newest parts of the autonomic nervous system joining forces” (Dana 2018:187). To embody and to dance this echo of our invertebrate past is a powerful statement of the shades of life that lie beneath and beyond common states of being.

Dana describes the delicate interaction of dorsal and ventral branches of the vagal system in immobilization without fear.

“Coming safely into stillness requires the ventral vagus to restrain the escape movements of the sympathetic nervous system and join with the dorsal vagal system while inhibiting its movement into protective dissociation” (Dana 2018:184).

SRT classes offer carefully guided routes through this potential minefield. Waves of high energy are followed by moments of “just being”, then by *checklists* slipping into deep *totalities*. And classes offer space for students to come deeply in contact with their autonomic responses on the way. It is not unusual for students to slip into sleep, or simply decide not to move for the rest of the class as – through the lens of polyvagal theory - waves of *dorsal vagal* dissociation and *immobilization* emerge and take them down. But over time, with “sponginess” and “melting rolls and rises” (Skinner 2006), supported by imagery, students find the ways to slip back into motion.

There is a strong element of *co-regulation* in developing the skills to manage stillness. Dana advises a therapist to “Move into stillness through the linking of your own ventral and dorsal vagal circuits and then encourage your client to sense the cues of safety your stillness is sending” (2018:186). In SRT *co-regulation* offered by the teacher and between participants, holds a safe space as students are invited into deep states. There is a palpable sense of *co-regulation* as the whole room gradually becomes more and more intensely still, bodies spread across the floor and sinking together into increasingly motionless rest. Again this spreads osmosis-like through the space, as students gradually begin stirring and rising from this frozen landscape one by one, often from one end of the room to the other, and melting into movement. We establish between us levels of safety and openness to allow potential collective surrender and vulnerability.

*Immobilization without fear*, Porges writes, is the mammalian condition for intimacy; essential to life, reproduction and caring for one another (Porges 2011:172). Dana describes the “tenderness of stillness” (Dana 2018:183) which allows us deeply and satisfactorily to connect with others.

“We need to disarm our defences and come into a shared experience of safe immobilization, first to meet our early nurturing needs and then for ongoing moments of intimate connection” (Dana 2018:185).

Dana highlights the importance of *immobilization without fear* also for experiences of awe, of intimate connectedness with spirit, and with nature. “Nature in its vastness and repeating patterns, reliably brings people into feeling awe” (Dana 2018:189). She recommends nurturing a close connection with nature. “Make a practice of standing outdoors and taking in the experience of being one small human woven into the vastness of the planet” (Dana 2018:189). In SRT we imagine and absorb the vastness of nature as a regular practice. In *image actions* and *totalities* we imagine qualities of nature directly and deeply within the tissues of the body; seeing and feeling them as vivid, changing, natural landscapes within our body’s interior and

practise allowing them to move us. These images and experiences become increasingly established and familiar in the tissues of our body's memory and, just as Dana's exercises intend for her clients, can gradually redefine our basic autonomic tone, towards one of spaciousness and trust which is increasingly knowable and available to us.

Dana describes the immobilized but fearless experience of awe, for nature or a world greater than ourselves, as a state which uses the *social engagement system* in non-typical ways.

"Awe graces us not through material things or social interactions but rather through information-rich experiences like those found in nature, art and music. We feel awe in response to mountains, storms, oceans, the repetition of waves, and the patterns of nature" (Dana 2018 p187).

In SRT we regularly experience and learn to ride the waves of such experiences both kinaesthetically and imaginatively. "The whole self can float in the sea of breath" (Skinner 2006). We are invited to sense and move with the notion that the midline of our body is "very like the axis of the earth" (Skinner 2006). The vast majority of poetic kinaesthetic images that we absorb visually and sensorially within our physicality come from nature – white mist, the undercurrent of a river, shadows, dew, rainforests, mountain tops, underground caverns. In SRT we actively absorb and ingest, and gradually habituate, the stillness, the intimacy, the awe and the calming influence of nature within our sensorial experience. This stillness and this capacity for awe in the natural world of which we are a part, can verge upon the spiritual. Although a specific exploration of this dimension of SRT lies beyond the scope of this thesis, Dana reveals how human physiology and emotion are embedded in energetic exchange with our world through the profound stillness without fear made possible through the ANS.

And Dana acknowledges the power of immersive imagery in supporting the nervous system to discover such profound and intricate states of being.

"..guided imagery brings the experience alive through multiple senses and is a way to experiment with embodying a state of immobilization without fear" (Dana 2018:185).

She invites therapists to support their clients in creating "richly detailed imagery of feeling safely immobilized" and to "guide them into an embodied experience of imagery" (Dana 2018:185). The use of an embodied experience of imagery to alter state is the territory of SRT par excellence. Several totalities offer this route of access to the tenderness of stillness. There is a totality of a "pool of crystal clear water – some parts deep, some parts shallow" with which we meld: "the edges of the pool become the edges of us" (Skinner 2006). In another class, after a period of moving, students are invited to "melt into the floor", taken through a *checklist*

and into an awareness of the breath becoming “exquisitely soft”. Gently they are led into the deep *totality* of “the whole self, enveloped in a mantel of stillness” (Skinner 2006).

In SRT we practise absorbing and embodying stillness even as we dance. SRT facilitates simplicity and stillness within, even as we move. This is practised quite specifically in *graphics* and *movement studies*. This is first supported by touch, in the hands-on breath *graphic* described earlier, then in the “torso suspension” which encourages a sense of inner suspension. We then cultivate “dynamic stillness” in the torso as we move speedily through space, supported by an image of “the deep undercurrent of a river” (Skinner 2006). The “river running” *movement study* is practised first with the ongoing touch of our partner, and then with the imagined support of “phantom hands”, until we can reliably find this inner stillness for ourselves (Skinner 2006). Stillness becomes an element of movement. A physical sensation of stillness and simplicity within the torso assumes functioning *vagal influence* upon the heart and lungs. SRT practises this “dynamic stillness” remaining as we move our limbs and move through space.

I argue that this embodied state of *immobilization without fear*, occurring alongside *mobilization* and within movement, is a highly sophisticated hybrid state that defines and underpins a core element of the “primal grace” (Skinner 2010) that SRT seeks to bring forth. This is a vibrant living state, and one which can concentrate and compellingly convey the energy of life. “When one part of us is still, energy expresses itself in new ways” (Skinner 2006).

SRT classes actively induce a *dorsal-ventral hybrid state* of ‘intimacy’ - a state of trust, gentleness and openness in intimate co-existence with the teacher, with the other selves in the space and also with perhaps quite unfamiliar aspects of oneself. My early experiences of SRT were of overwhelming warmth and welcome: of radical protection from judgement and self-judgement; and delicious permission to go at my own (sometimes snail’s) pace and follow my own unfolding inclinations. For the first few months of my SRT practice I simply absorbed the opportunity to slow and soften and rediscover the sensory richness of my body. And I have seen this with many students. After this has taken hold, very gradually we find ourselves being drawn - up Dana’s “autonomic ladder” (Dana 2018:9) - into the other adroit hybrid condition of *mobilization without fear*.

SRT then specifically enacts and practices Porges’ two crucial hybrid states. This is excellent for developing a performer’s expressive range, from dynamic qualities of stillness (combined *dorsal-ventral* innervation) to free flowing energetic vigour (*sympathetic-ventral* collaboration)

in intricately layered combinations of innervation and stimuli. Beyond performance uses, this offers useful neural exercises for embodied life. Lightening the implied labour of climbing Dana's ladder, SRT practices seamlessly slipping in and out of stillness, and between states. I posit that this develops refined skills in managing the *vagal brake* alongside progressive flows toward *mobilization* or *immobilization without fear*. I argue that SRT facilitates this spectrum in the tissues in remarkable detail, in artful collaboration with the ANS. With minimal instruction, but through creative stimulation and encouragement, through image, sound and sensation, SRT beguiles and innervates our tissues. With repetition these states and processes become integrated into our repertoire of ways of being. We learn to integrate, incorporate and move smoothly between extremes as we navigate our weight and energy in space.

"There is no change between lying on the floor and moving on the feet – falling becomes rising. The relationship to gravity becomes suspended... with an integration of weight and buoyancy" (Skinner 2010).

I would argue then that SRT's processes of calming and engaging "the whole self" (Skinner 2006) - which includes working at depth with autonomic innervation - serves the dancer more kindly and effectively than modes of instruction which attempt to create change through judgement, correction and control. And I have witnessed how these processes can be helpful, relieving and transformational to the mixed populations, including non-dancers, who attend my classes. SRT offers embodied experiences of lightening the two primary limiting states of *sympathetic arousal* and *immobilization*. Unhooking them from a primarily – and potentially chronic - defensive stance, SRT meets them and softens them with *vagal tone*. I've heard expert dancers say "I've never moved so much as in SRT classes" and "I've never rested so much in a class". And my non-dancer students report very similar experiences. SRT then, recruits, inhabits and enriches autonomic function – the ability to feel safe and alive - to support states of being that are not necessarily defensive, but are responsive, intelligent and creative.

### **The 'Melting Dance' and 'Watchful State' as Neural Pathways to Safety and Freedom**

Porges, Rosenberg and Dana all recognise the value of movement to support autonomic regulation, stimulate blood flow to the brain, and exercise the *vagal brake*. "Changing posture (including lying down, sitting, standing, turning, rocking, leaning) changes autonomic tone" (Dana 2018:157). And Dana and Rosenberg highlight how attuning sensitively to the experience of movement develops skills to support autonomic wellbeing. Dana invites clients sometimes to rest on a ball to encourage their bodies to soften and relax and to become more open to the awareness of micro-movements. In these small adjustments, she explains, lies

the opportunity for close awareness of change. I would argue that two seminal dances – the “melting dance” and “watchful state” (Skinner 2006) – which lie beneath and within most of what we do in SRT, offer especially rich and pleasurable instances of movement to this end, stimulating intimate awareness of releasing and shifting habits of being.

I propose these two fundamental SRT movement studies as rich *neural exercises*, practising the delicate, constantly shifting micro-movements of *intertwined autonomic states*. These deceptively simple yet infinitely textured states of being are introduced and practised element by element via *partner graphics* and *image actions* within the first few classes. They become essential baselines of SRT practice and remain core states of being to which we constantly add detail or complexity. Practised repeatedly, they become the basis for all subsequent moving. I argue that in the patient, rigorous introduction of each element of these complex states, SRT is particularly effective in changing and developing autonomic tone, working with acute awareness and practising personal agency in our ability to intervene into and change our embodied experience. That which Dana teaches as a conscious process, SRT guides us through more passively and playfully through the touch of *partner graphics*, immersion in *totalities* and *image actions*.

The melting dance moves gently “in and out of the floor”. It emerges gradually within the first class: first with exploring the possibility of “soft, supple feet” and how they meet the floor; then “melting knees”; “softening into moving”; then “the whole-self melting into the floor” and into an image action of resting and gently rolling on an “enormous cushion, very soft and very deep” (like Dana’s ball); “melting rolling”; “melting rising”; and travelling through space on “soft, supple feet and knees”. This gradually merges into the “melting dance” - a repeated freeform cycle of rolling, rising, travelling and melting “into and out of the floor” (Skinner 2006). Students practise each element, taking time to sense and cultivate letting go and softening throughout “the whole self”. They practise elemental transitions between moving and pausing, noticing in close detail any involuntary holding or tightening as they come to stillness and begin moving.

In the melting dance we first encounter and explore the fundamental sense of “effortless effort” (Skinner 2006). The Underlying Principles of “Allowing” and “Awareness” (Skinner 2010) prevail, so that rest occurs as motion occurs, in their own time, while feeling “suppleness everywhere” (Skinner 2006). As each new awareness is offered we are given time and invitation - in motion or in resting - to sense and cultivate it, and experience its resonance throughout the physical self. As layers of habitual holding begin to soften, the “physical self” (Skinner 2006) feels its volume and its surfaces afresh. Micro-movements become monumental experiences of action and unfolding as the skull rolls a millimetre to one side, as

other tissues either follow or resist. We develop an intense awareness of the ebb and flow of activity and passivity. We experience (*ventral vagal*) glimmers of pleasure and curiosity, shots of (*sympathetic*) momentum, the drag and sink of (*dorsal*) closure - all within the rich sensation of unfolding motion. The “melting dance” frames a live negotiation of the border territory between instinctive urges to move or to retreat from movement; and the chance to discover and allow movement despite apparent resistance. We become masters of noticing and navigating the moments when we cross thresholds into the unknown or the unfamiliar; when we feel exposed, reluctant, or awkward; and when we feel radically safe and free.

The melting dance is profoundly soft and inward, we can have our eyes closed for much of the time. It is predominantly an exploration of soft and smooth transitions “into and out of the earth” (Skinner 2006). It feels weightless, boundless and womb-like, and it lays the groundwork for the Underlying Principle that “The relationship to gravity is suspended – with an integration of weight and buoyancy” (Skinner 2010).

And this dance has a more alert and outward sister “the watchful state”. In the watchful state we move through space, potentially at speed, yet with “inner suspension”, “dynamic stillness in the torso”, easy, “autonomous breath”, wide open gaze and pulsing “radar” so that we are aware of one another and the space. We “come close without crashing” (Skinner 2006). We have a wide awareness and a heightened sense of the energetic space around and between us. We move with clarity, simplicity and inner stillness, and a wide, receptive consciousness.

This too is introduced and practiced element by element, through particular images and partner graphics. The watchful state is underpinned by the breath which remains “free and autonomous” as we establish “inner suspension” first with the help of our partner’s hands supporting our lower ribs, and then by ourselves (Skinner 2006). In the watchful state there is a serenity and a stillness which comes with us as we move. First we practice moving just an arm without disturbing the clarity and inner space; then a rotation or a tipping of the skull; rotations of the whole self; dropping to a crouch; we add pauses before the movement and remove them again; all while causing minimal disturbance to the stillness and openness within us. We practise moving while causing minimal disturbance in the space and milieu. Dana writes: “Movements with smooth transitions create receptivity toward the environment” (Dana 2018:158) and SRT facilitates, perhaps above all else, a smoothness, ease and fullness of movement, which facilitates alert, engaged and engaging presence. “Melting knees are fundamental to all movement” (Skinner 2010).

The melting dance remains within the watchful state, and the watchful state within all our dancing. We practise some form of both of these fundamental states in every class, as they become increasingly layered with more and more complex, expansive and adventurous dancing. I propose that these rich dances act as *neural platforms* from which we can leap into creative play. In them we learn to maintain and apply a constant level of the adaptive, intelligent *ventral vagal* influence that Porges refers to as “*vagal tone*” (Porges 2011:63). With the support of the safety and the calm curiosity provided by the *ventral vagus*, moving with and between *mobilization* and *immobilization* becomes an intense and intricate experience of and in oneself, of and in the world.

Moving up Dana’s “autonomic ladder” is not only about the discharge of energy in the moment of encountering *sympathetic arousal*. It is equally about resourcing the body with *ventral vagal* support through *co-regulation* and through recruiting Porges’ *social engagement system*. In the practises of SRT we build up felt, known and reliably accessible states of being that recruit these resources. SRT images, and dances such as the melting dance and the watchful state are eminent examples of Dana’s “ventral anchors” or “snapshots of ventral vagal experience” which we savour and save, ready to be drawn upon (Dana 2020:96-7). These dances are extended snapshots that conjure ventral state, both through active and through passive neural pathways in the very moment that we dance them, and etch longer term the precious *myelinated ventral vagal pathways* deeper into our being. They conjure *ventral pathways* even in memory and imagination. They offer the nervous system’s active memory an alternative story that it can take hold of and build a state of being – a dance - around.

### **SRT and Autonomic Space**

The inherent complexity and paradox of the rich embodied states which we achieve in SRT’s dances, might be understood to pertain also to the notion of “autonomic space” (Berntson, Cacioppo, Quigley, Fabro 1994); and to represent a quality of advanced safety and freedom through the ANS. This concept expands upon the notion that sympathetic and parasympathetic responses are not necessarily reciprocal or antagonistic but work together in more complex and collaborative ways.

“...autonomic control of dually innervated target organs cannot adequately be viewed as a continuum extending from parasympathetic to sympathetic dominance. Rather, a two-dimensional autonomic space, bounded by sympathetic and parasympathetic axes, is the minimal representation necessary to characterize the multiple modes of autonomic control.” (Berntson, Cacioppo, Quigley, Fabro 1994:459).

Berntson et al outline how organs can be dually innervated by *sympathetic* and *parasympathetic* divisions of the ANS and *mobilized* and *immobilized* both in opposition and in co-operation. They can be “uncoupled” whereby a *mobilizing* or *immobilizing* response can occur without necessitating change in the other stimulus (Berntson, Cacioppo, Quigley, 1991:45). The concept of autonomic space supposes a subtlety of co-operation and dynamic range within autonomic innervation that embraces, I would argue, the sudden and explosive movements we can perform in SRT while still retaining “dynamic stillness” within the body, and an alert awareness.

Porges suggests that the “intriguing concept of autonomic space” (Porges 2011:27) invokes potential in exploring interactions between different aspects of *vagal innervation*, and I propose that SRT enters into and cultivates a dynamic and perceptive autonomic space within the body; that SRT intuitively grasps and knows what sophisticated ANS co-operation feels like in practice - voluminous, suspended, alert and open. Cultivating a visceral experience of inner bodily space that is full of energy, life and responsiveness is a basic and constant of SRT process. In movement and in stillness, we visualise and feel spaces “falling open, inward” within the tissues of different parts of our physical interior, and we practise “allowing those spaces to remain open as we move” (Skinner 2006). Our interior spaces are first introduced as fairly specific: “window-like spaces between each vertebra and the next, all along the spine” or “long curving spaces between the ribs, in the front and in the back”, “a space opening inside the base of the skull and the back of the neck” or “a bowl-like space in the pelvis” (Skinner 2006). These spaces “move us”, or “move with us” and assimilate new dimensions and resilience as they “become our dance” (Skinner 2006).

Over time, the spaces morph and interconnect as releasing process deepens. Gradually our awareness extends beyond our interior, to keenly apprehend and respond to spaces around and outside of us. In *totalities* and in dancing, our inner and outer spaces interact and merge. In a recurring movement study we maintain our attention on “seeing and feeling our inner spaces remaining open and supple” even as we simultaneously “allow a sudden, supple move to occur” (Skinner 2006). As these movements grow to include “sudden supple moves of the whole self, out into space – while our inner spaces remain open” (Skinner 2006) we are able to move in and out of stillness and explosive movement with simplicity and power. Boundaries between our inner and outer spaces seem to blur. I argue that SRT effectively stimulates and recruits autonomic space to embody an expressive, voluminous spontaneity that aids us in the process of “becoming transparent” (Skinner 2010). Autonomic space may be understood as an essential element of dance, one which SRT has expertise in practising. This quality of movement practice then frames effective resources for wellbeing.

SRT's "web-like" Principle (Skinner 2010) echoes not only the looping, multi-layered and interconnected process of the technique's structure, but the interior of the physical self. Repeated imagery of "web-likeness" - the many threads and strings; the "lacy lattice of shadows and space" (Skinner 2006) – invoke our web-like nervous system; the fringed tendrils of the branched and wandering vagus nerve; the connective tissue we soften and set alight through autonomic innervation. The experiential richness that SRT is able to engender between and across the circuits of the ANS is borne out by the subtlety of the physiology of the *vagus* - still a field of discovery. Acknowledging this, Porges supposes opportunities for increasing interconnections and discoveries:

“...different vagi may have oppositional outputs to the same target organ... Thus the concept of vagal tone may not be generalised...“the intriguing concept of autonomic space... may require an additional dimension to deal with potential vago-vagal interactions” (Porges 2011:27).

I propose that SRT offers an experiential route through which to explore autonomic space and this thickening emerging field of vago-vagal relations. Returning to the fundamental SRT image of the sea sponge – I suggest that this image contains a possibility of vago-vagal relations and interactions of both *dorsal* and *ventral* influence. It certainly feels like that: warm and soft and alive, while profoundly basic, hovering on the border of consciousness. I argue that in SRT dancers offer powerful access to images and experiences of rich, complex, inner autonomic space that is enthused with kindly, intelligent *vagal tone* to support our deepest organ function; frame inner simplicity, stillness and space; fuel muscular movement freedoms; as well as our ability to read and interact with the space around us. This enacts an autonomic state of safety, physically defined by and containing freedom to move, to feel and to explore – literally ‘to our heart’s content’.

I propose that the self-generating, “holographic” (Skinner 2010) imagery of SRT which forms its immersive dances and conditions of continuous softening or expansion, is key to exploring and experiencing states of safety and freedom, even without knowledge of the intimate anatomical detail that Porges seeks. It is in the strange, surrendering passivity of “being danced” (Skinner 2006) that we feel safe enough to move beyond ourselves and discover states of freedom that we have not previously known. It is as though some braver, deeper, unknown part of us – a part of us that is sparked by imagination and creativity – takes us by the hand and leads us. This aspect is at least in part supported by the *vagus* and other nerves of our ANS, innervating our muscles and organs to explore their own potential.

Somatic dance movement therapist Amanda Williamson has recently spoken of her excitement at Porges' recognition of the hybrid autonomic states and the subtle interactions of sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions of the nervous system. And she insists that this is only a beginning, that there are many more permutations, interconnections, collaborations within the ANS; that we can and must explore further new conceptions of and ways to resource and interact with the ANS to support mental and spiritual wellbeing (Williamson 2020a). And these new explorations, she argues, are particularly available to the somatic dancer. I share her view and argue that somatic dancers possess the embodied articulacy and confidence; the movement and sensory skills; the habits; the freedom; the urge; the delight; and perhaps most importantly the innate trust in their own feeling bodies, to pioneer this territory. Williamson is working to celebrate and functionally apply these skills in the development and teaching of the valuable new field of somatic dance naturotherapy, developing creative therapeutic approaches to treatment of multiple threats to wellbeing in our world. SRT stands both within and next to this work, overlapping with – indeed comprising - many of its practices, processes and principles; while it is focussed primarily towards the creative art and state of dance. SRT allows for profound personal unfolding to arise in dance, and through this etches out ways of inhabiting ourselves more safely and fully. In myriad spontaneous changes and responses, and constant delicate awareness of our inner and outer conditions, we develop practical skills in sensitivity to states that are multi-layered, unpredictable, slippery, sticky and mysterious.

### **SRT and ANS Expression through Inter-Personal Space**

SRT frames a coming into contact with oneself, with the realities and possibilities of one's own physicality and energy, with one's own embodied desires and needs, as well as an openness and a becoming present in the world. The Underlying Principle of "Listening to Essences" requires us fundamentally to "practice listening to the physical self" (2010). And I would argue that it is in this compassionate self-awareness and self-acceptance that a more authentic presencing and opening to our environment becomes possible. Importantly however, in SRT we acknowledge, assume and practise this personal unfolding in a group, in the presence of others. I want to highlight this layering of awareness, within which we purposefully make space to listen and attend to our own emerging inner experience while amongst others all practising the same process, as an important dimension of SRT, which becomes clearer in the light of polyvagal theory.

Inter-personal space is not commonly acknowledged or addressed in SRT discourse. However, from the perspective of the nervous system we can understand how this layering of experience helps us to develop further dimensions of safety – safety that we establish through

*co-regulation*, in relationship to others; as well as the presence and freedom to inhabit and assert ourselves more fully within inter-personal space.

As compared to some other Western contemporary dance forms, and especially with Contact Improvisation which shares important elements with it<sup>12</sup>, SRT is often thought of as a relatively non-contact and solo dance form. It primarily frames a deeply personal process, and affords a high level of privacy to that process. There is minimal direct intervention from the teacher. We offer no feedback, interpretation or assessment in the ordinary sense beyond clarification of the *graphic* or image, or details of the kinaesthetic exploration. We offer gentle guidance and holding from a discreet distance. As a student one has a feeling of being protected but left alone with your experience, rather than being closely observed. Dancing with others occurs, but largely in the sense of a simple exchange – of touch, of a particular sensation – offerings which feed into one's own process. However, I argue that SRT, on the level of the ANS, is profoundly interpersonal; that it raises our awareness of *neuroceptive* processes and frames a situation where significant autonomic *co-regulation* occurs. SRT frames an awareness of inter-personal space that is highly sensitive and alive, and in which our own presence becomes implicated and vital.

Porges has highlighted the extent to which, through *neuroception*, our ANS is in constant exchange with the nervous systems of others around us; and how we powerfully, unconsciously *co-regulate* ourselves and one another - either towards states of fear and defensiveness or of safety and connection. I argue that SRT frames an openness to and an awareness of vital aliveness and *co-regulation* in this highly charged interpersonal space, and offers constant invitation and stimulus both to increase sensitivity to this and to practise inhabiting and negotiating it with courage, faith and generosity. Embedded in the body, in energy, and movement, we perceive ourselves and one another as creatures, as “presences” or “beings” (Skinner 2006) in the space. Venturing into the feeling states beneath our own and others’ worldly identities, we become increasingly alive to energetic resonance and *neuroceptive* exchange. IN SRT we practise using our “radar” (Skinner 2006). The metaphorical word itself signals, I would suggest, Joan Skinner’s intuitive recognition of our powers of *neuroception*. We read our environment, and our nervous system connects our experience deep into our visceral organs. And vice versa, we beam out into space our autonomic state.

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<sup>12</sup> CI and SRT share central concepts and practices such as the spreading and pouring of weight through multi-directional alignment, a sense of three dimensional travel in and out of the floor, between surfaces and space, and a fluid continuum between falling and rising.

In one seminal graphic we approach a standing partner who faces away from us. We sense them and practise moving towards them not excessively slowly but with utmost gentleness, so as not to “startle” them (Skinner 2006). If they sense us coming or want to check the situation, they turn around for a moment and we stop moving, we pause, and wait. Then gently continue approaching them, until we are close enough to touch. If this exercise is taught or practised without full respect for its import, it can seem oddly bland. I would argue that that import becomes vitally evident when we consider polyvagal theory and the ANS. The graphic is a gently titrated experience of advancing towards and sensing potential agitation in the nervous system. At the first sign of arousal, we pause and give ourselves time to settle, re-apprehend the situation, before continuing. It is an exercise in sensing and being present, exploring safety and agency within interpersonal space. The shared space is felt as alive and energised. It becomes softened as we become gently present. In its gentle stop-go format, whereby one partner waits until the other gives the go signal again, this exercise - in a sense a macro version of Rosenberg’s “neuro-fascial release” - takes us deep into the workings of the ANS. Through the inter-personal space of SRT we practise and establish our sense of safety in regards to others.

Similarly each phase of a class, shifting between highly energetic movement, stillness, and intense touch or movement exchanges with a partner – generally tends to have a sense of *co-regulation* between the students, sharing and supporting one another in autonomic tone and communicating rhythmically. Sometimes there is a natural dividing of the group which is visible in space, between a more energised portion of the students *co-regulating* one another in playful *mobilization*, while in another area of the room movement is gentler or barely occurring. Shared consensus and *co-regulation* increases safety and opportunity for playful freedom or for intimate encounters with the self. Students have often spoken to me too, of the remarkable sense of simple benevolence and kindness there is amongst the group in an SRT class. This does not mean overt social exchanges or behaviours, but a warmth and openness, a sense of welcome and gentle exchange that is generated between them as they soften into their own physical and sensorial beings, in the presence of others. There is a shared experience of disarming the fear response and loosening up to one’s inner reality, safely in the company of others.

Ordinary group SRT classes do not frame the same level of intimate one on one monitoring and involvement of the therapist/teacher with the client/mover’s individual inner experience that Dana describes. However this meeting can occur in *graphics*; and sometimes with a partner there can be very intimate shared experiences, where it is possible for partners to sense and name the boundaries of their own and one another’s safety, or together sense a

shift in some deeply habitual and involuntary state of being, either emotional or physical. We can share awareness of physiological releasing and change, somewhere in the system.

Some moments of gentle, skilled exchange in partner graphics, with each of us involved in our own journeys of discovery and unfolding while offering one another support through touch, have been revelatory and powerfully transformative instances of releasing for me. With the touch of my partner's hands, patiently offering a taste of some new freedom, and my own practice of "allowing change to occur" (Skinner 2010), I can feel myself releasing ancient defences. After one of these experiences I remember spontaneous tears at the suggestion of the teacher that we move on to repeat the exercise with a different partner. The *co-regulation* had been so strong, and the releasing so deep that I needed more time to take it in before encountering another presence. SRT offers many such opportunities to sense the delicate negotiation between personal and shared experience, and practices the art of taking space for oneself within shared space. I would suggest that these are excellent *neural exercises* in developing a sense of safety and freedom within shared space and relationships.

Of course in a group class there are likely to be some people who find it easier to partner others, and some it is more comfortable to be partnered with. For people with highly defended or agitated nervous systems this can be-challenging. It is important that the teacher is sensitive to this and supports students to partner appropriately. At the least an intuitive understanding of nervous system function is appropriate here, and I would argue that a working knowledge of the ANS would usefully frame this aspect of the work. However autonomically robust we are, there is an excellent opportunity for continuous learning and development in these close encounters with other people's deep states of being. The simplicity and egalitarianism built into this exchange is potentially both humbling and empowering.

The teacher's role then is very important, to be aware of the dynamics in the room and to temper them with their own gentle presence. Dana asserts that "Our physiology is regulated in connection with another" (Dana 2018:46) and highlights the role of direct *co-regulation* between herself and her clients. Although it is a very different relationship, I argue that there is also a subtly co-regulatory process between the SRT teacher and the students, as well as between the students. The teacher is conscious of the room as a whole, gently witnessing and holding the space for personal and potentially vulnerable processes of unfolding awareness and allowing. And I am aware that my own nervous system state and my presence in the room can deeply effect the experience of my students. It is the norm in SRT classes to begin with a period of quiet tuning in to oneself and to the space, and the teacher will do this routinely before class. Apart from the many other physical and emotional reasons that this might be

useful before a dance class, I would argue then that in autonomic terms, and particularly considering the potency of *co-regulation*, that this time is essential in SRT, for the teacher to become settled and awake to the rhythms of the space and to be able to hold them, and balance them with their own *ventral state* of safety and openness.

### **SRT - a Dance of Regression and Progression**

SRT understands the back and forth flow, the viscosity and obscurity of embodied process. “This technique is not linear. A does not lead to B, and B to C. Rather it is web-like” (Skinner 2010). There is ultimate patience and permission in SRT which allows regression and retreat, while offering endless opportunities for growth and change. Real glimpses of new freedoms - of less holding and more functional alignment - are offered through *graphics* and through *image actions*. Consciously or unconsciously, these glimpses can be assimilated and explored in dances and movement studies. Touch, sound, voice, breath, a constant softening in the body, offer gentle encouragement and *co-regulation*, while deep sensorial needs are able to surface and to be expressed in movement. Stimuli and encouragement are constantly fed in while expectation, judgement and demand are radically removed.

In SRT there is no demand for change, only opportunities. Yet SRT offers us beacons of clarity and the possibility of development through *graphics* and *images* for our innervated tissues to clutch onto and explore. Gentle yet deliberate progressions can be traced through the series of classes, so that *images*, *graphics*, *movement studies* build upon one another, gaining in richness and complexity, yet gaining too in strange and powerful coherence. When one state or sensation becomes assimilated we can build upon it, add to it. To suppleness we add suspension. To suspension we add multi-directionality. To multi-directionality we add weight. To weight we add buoyancy and so it goes.

We are encouraged to notice how sensations of releasing can seem to stimulate or coincide with sensations and changes in apparently disconnected parts of the body. The *checklists* that occur in each class become more random and open in how attention travels, yet more connections are revealed. “Letting go here stimulates letting go there” (Skinner 2006) – unpredictable yet related, teaching us to notice and appreciate the mysteriously inter-dependent structures and systems of the body. SRT’s Underlying Principle of “Web-likeness” (Skinner 2010) pervades not only the looping structure of the classes but many of the images: the “gossamer threads” and the “lacy lattice of shadows and space” (Skinner 2006). I understand the ANS like this – particularly the vitally supportive *vagus* (wandering) nerve, which meanders through the physical self, making fundamental connections between brain

and body, between viscera, memory and perception. The fibres innervate fascia, organs and muscles, interconnect with our central, peripheral, and enteric nervous systems, and influence our capacities for perception, movement, and communication.

The ANS underpins (and potentially undermines) our ability to feel safe, to be present and responsive in the world. It is fundamentally rooted in the fibres and the flesh of the human body and it creates or restricts the energy and the movement that we have available. Working in close collaboration with the ANS is one of the fundamental ways that SRT opens and deepens our experience, not of the body itself but of the world all around us and our place within it.

### **SRT and Active and Passive Pathways through the ANS**

Porges states that there are both passive and active pathways to experiences of safety through the ANS.

“The human nervous system provides two paths to trigger neural mechanisms capable of down-regulating defence and enabling states of calmness that support health, spontaneous social behaviour, and connectedness. One path is passive and does not require conscious awareness (see “Neuroception”) and the other is active and requires conscious voluntary behaviors to trigger specific neural mechanisms that change physiological state” (Porges, Carter 2017b:222).

The positive passive pathway Porges highlights is *co-regulation* with a kindly other or others. Porges cites the *prosodic* voice of the therapist, the safe, contained and soothing environment of the therapy room and “the calming of the patient through social engagement” (Porges, Carter 2017b:221). Although different to the overtly therapeutic context Porges is thinking of, all of the above are features of the SRT class; and I argue that unusually safe and kindly interpersonal space and relationships is a significant *co-regulatory* feature of SRT process. The technique delicately and deliberately suspends judgement, inspires self-compassion, and effectively calms and encourages the student through the social engagement system.

Additionally, I propose the deep states of immersive *image actions* and *totalities* in SRT as potent channels of the passive pathway through which the ANS becomes stimulated. SRT guides the student into a passive state beneath conscious awareness where kinaesthetic imagery takes a commanding role. In the consenting state of “being danced” and where “it dances” (Skinner 2006) - ‘it’ being the movement - SRT frames gentle and creative access to, and free expression of, profound inclinations and energetic motions that lie unconsciously

within the body. The intense kinaesthetic awareness that we cultivate in SRT is not as closely tracked or consciously monitored as it is in some somatic movement practices, such as Authentic Movement for example. In SRT our creative energy is rather directed toward becoming deeply immersed in the sensorial and imaginative experience so that “Movement occurs. The technique encourages the allowing for ‘it’ to move, rather than the self making the move” (Skinner 2010). In that partially passive state we discover new freedom and new courage.

The active neural pathways can be stimulated through voluntary intervention, and Porges has written in support of the efforts of various complementary and integrative healing practices to apply information from polyvagal theory. He highlights in particular how some mind-body and ACIM practices effectively engage the active pathway of the ANS via conscious breathing exercises, through movement that significantly alters body posture such as yoga and qi gong, and through use of the voice including sounding, singing and chanting. Each of these are active pathways to “exercise the neural circuits that promote neurophysiological states supporting health” (Porges, Carter 2017b: 221). I would argue that in SRT we engage also each of these active pathways with particular sensitivity and richness. We do not “do exercises” but “play with the resonances” from a partner graphic. We “experiment with the pitch” in vocal sounding, and engage in improvisational play around a live felt sense or “kinaesthetic awareness” as we “allow this to become our dance” (Skinner 2006). We allow ourselves to dance.

The potential of the application of imagery to affect neuro-muscular patterning is well understood within dance and dance training (Franklin 1996) and is commonly used to help dancers achieve certain qualities. I would argue that SRT deepens and enriches this process through inviting the dancer further inside an immersive image and into the process of actively becoming passive within it. In willingly handing ourselves over to “being moved” by an image, we experience, absorb and embody more of its, and of our own, potential. SRT frames active voluntary behaviours in *movement studies* but these are contained within, and infused with, a more passive state which supports a trusting and unfolding of the moment at a level beyond the reach of voluntary behaviour. This lies within Skinner’s Underlying Principles of “Listening to essences of the self” and “Allowing something to happen” (Skinner 2010) and I would argue provides glimmers of and access to real freedom.

In her “Moments of Movement” exercise, Dana identifies different movement activities within the different autonomic states in Porges’ hierarchy and places the act of dancing itself wholly within a *ventral vagal state* (2020:119). I argue then, that in SRT, where everything is explored

through dance, and where “Any kind of movement can be dance, including stillness” (Skinner 2010), we make extraordinarily creative use of *ventral vagal influence*, in a creative process which combines both active and passive pathways to the ANS.

Through SRT’s “web-like” (Skinner 2010) intertwining of layers of sensorial experience, imagination and creative play; through its gentleness and permissiveness; through its assumption that we are natural, graceful beings embedded into space and earth and through allowing ourselves to “be danced” (Skinner 2006); SRT intuitively and skilfully recruits multiple aspects of both the active and passive pathways to Porges’ neural mechanisms. Indeed SRT practices, develops and reveals these as profoundly inter-woven and inter-acting possibilities, pointing towards Porges’ own notion of vago-vagal relations and ever more complex permutations of autonomic space and state. And I propose then that SRT frames a particularly rich opportunity for engaging with the nervous system and supporting ANS function. Through active and passive pathways combined, we ride on easy *mobilization*, dissolve into compelling stillness and into space, and embody presence - sourced with oxygen and energy.

I argue that it is in the combination of the agency and the surrender which SRT frames; in its radical compassion; its offering of physical comfort and pleasure (softening, spaciousness, lightness and eventually buoyancy); and in its essential drawing of the self towards creative playfulness; that SRT is able to enter and cultivate subtle hybrid states of the ANS and thus unfurl a bridge towards safety, and from safety towards freedom.

## Conclusion

I have argued then, that SRT is in possession of a particular field of expertise that frames creative access to and recruitment of the autonomic nervous system; that SRT practices intuitively soften and regulate the potentially inhibiting effects of *sympathetic arousal* and *dorsal vagal* closure, and increase *ventral vagal* support, so that all potential states of being within the ANS become available. The technique nurtures unusually fine-tuned and inter-related function of the ANS's various *sympathetic* and *parasympathetic* drives, enabling complex *hybrid autonomic states* that can support some of the most important and generative experiences of life. In its sensitive embrace and celebration of unconscious and sensorial states of being, and its active attention to kinaesthetic awareness, SRT opens channels to ANS function and pours them into dance. SRT does not only release unnecessary sympathetic holding in its over-riding process of "letting go" (Skinner 200); or discharge trapped energy through shaking and quivering into expansive movement; but engages and redirects that energy into creative expression.

SRT generates cues of safety through deliberate interventions of touch, partner work, breath, voice, and movement; and practises exploring, absorbing and embodying the kinaesthetic resonance of these interventions through active neural pathways. Alongside these active interventions, SRT reaches the ANS through passive neural pathways of *neuroception*, *co-regulation* with the teacher and other students, and through engaging through somatic awareness with immersive imagery. The *prosodic* intonation of the teacher's voice and the felt exchange between the softening bodies in the shared space supports a process of deep trust and belonging. A profound sense of safety emerges through rhythmic motion and unhindered breathing, and is absorbed and emanated through the bodies of the students within the construction of the classes. Into this deeply relaxed and expanded state of being, poetic kinaesthetic imagery takes sensory and imaginative hold inside the body, and emerges back into movement taking the dancer further into pure states of kinaesthetic unfolding. This dance in turn draws upon the resources – the *mobilization* and the *immobilization*, the vigour and "dynamic stillness" (Skinner 2006) - made available through *sympathetic activation* and the *vagal* functions of the ANS; as well as the natural flows of energy and oxygen provided by efficient changes in the homeostatic functions which the ANS controls.

The ANS connects our experience of the world deep into our visceral organs and vice versa, beneath ordinary consciousness. SRT too reaches deep inside the self, and connects us out into space. We "ignite space" (Skinner 2010). Through close and creative collaboration with

the ANS, the dancer or mover in SRT is able to safely navigate a wider spectrum of dynamic and expressive states of being, affording them not only a wider palette of movement freedoms but a safer and bolder experience of the world and their place within it. In its radical compassion and permission; its offering of physical comfort and pleasure (softening, spaciousness, alignment, lightness and buoyancy); and in its essential drawing of the self towards creative playfulness; SRT is able to enter and cultivate complex hybrid states of the ANS and thus unfurl a bridge towards safety, and from safety towards freedom to arrive and act in this world. Deb Dana: “Polyvagal theory ... the science of feeling safe enough to fall in love with life and take the risks of living...” (Dana nd)

Safety is profoundly intertwined with, and the non-negotiable pre-requisite neural platform for, meaningful freedom. By meaningful freedom I am thinking of social psychologist Eric Fromm’s distinction not of “freedom *from*” danger or constraint – which I understand as closely entwined with and largely within the realm of safety - but as “freedom *to*” spontaneously act, play, explore, express oneself and engage (Fromm 1942:26). I am thinking of a state of being that is not constrained by fear, but rather is inspired and supported by desire and curiosity; a state of being which is not constrained by judgement but which is necessarily compassionate towards oneself and towards the world. I am referring to a state of being which is supported by and responsive to forces within and without the physical self. Freedom as I understand it involves a streak of innocence. It is supported by the flows of inspiration, nature, appetite, playfulness and trust. This freedom requires constraint only in terms of awareness of context, kindness, respect, avoiding doing harm, to self and others. If it flows within this channel it is supported by the power of innocence and turbo charged. I am thinking of safety and freedom as two sides of the same coin, that together offer significant currency of life. Safety represents the blissful state that is the absence of fear, and the possibility of live, alert and open presence. Freedom meanwhile, is infused with the desire and the power to act.

I maintain that SRT encompasses both of these qualities of freedom. I maintain that in SRT’s compassionate acknowledgement and welcome of human retreat, vulnerability and constriction as well as human expansion, transformation and advance – the natural, rhythmic dance between regression and progression which it fundamentally frames – the push and pull of the ANS – it supports us to hover, humbly and courageously on those edges between safety and freedom, between “freedom *from*” and “freedom *to*”. In my focus on the ANS and polyvagal theory’s “quest for safety” (Porges 2017:xv) within this study and this thesis, I have explored primarily how - through the *social engagement system* and sophisticated stimulation and support of *vagal tone* - SRT engages with and cultivates experiences of safety. I have

looked then, not exclusively but in the main, at “freedom from”: the freedom of calm; the absence of threat; support of *mobilization without fear* and *immobilization without fear*; appropriate arousal and the freedom to move and to respond which emerges from steadiness and inner stillness. Nevertheless this is still a freedom that is predicated on, and intertwined with, safety. I have also begun to explore and to hint throughout this thesis that in pouring ourselves into dance we are embracing and launching ourselves into motion towards Fromm’s greater goal of “freedom to”. I pertain that SRT not only secures us safety and “freedom from”, but that it succours routes to further and different shades of freedom; to appetites and impulses and joining forces with more than ourselves. Exploring these aspects of the technique require recourse to different theories and methodologies to inform them, and I shall move in this direction, explore powerful drives and facilitators of embodied emancipation, moving further into Fromm’s “freedom to”, in my ongoing work.

In SRT I have had experiences of knowing - of bodily and energetic knowing - that a movement, or a position, or a gesture, is safe, is truthful, is accurate and vital. My body knows how to feel itself, and to some degree – ever increasingly – how to right and to bear itself as it becomes older. This knowing is what is important. While there are certainly more and other systems also at play, ANS function is an important strand that lies beneath and within that knowing in SRT.

SRT provides a process to practice more easeful and efficient ways of being in the body, which in turn support more creative expression and compassionate presence in the world. I argue that it is largely through effective, if intuitive, recruitment of the ANS that SRT can support this embodied wellness. My students, dancers and non-dancers, have said “this is so much more than a dance class” and that coming to class is an important aspect of their life and wellbeing. Joan Skinner understood this.

“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 than a 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.” (Joan Skinner, Neuhaus 2014).

For myself, I came to SRT and to somatic practice, to dance itself, largely as a resource for discovering a certain kind of safety and a certain kind of freedom, through my body, and in movement. Increasingly, I appreciate this comforting, energising ongoing process of

embodiment as not a place to retreat to, or to reserve for the act of dancing, but as a place to live from.

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