In Praise of Non-Performance
in the Performing Arts

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Key Terminologies:

I. Introduction
The topic I have chosen for today’s presentation is: “In Praise of Non-Performance in the Performing Arts.” Upon hearing this title, many of you may immediately wonder if this speaker is in the right frame of mind, because “performance” generally means a series of bodily movements in which a performer engages, but the topic contains the word “non-performance,” which suggests an idea contrary to a commonsensical understanding of performance. For this reason, I am afraid that some of you may silently pass a judgment that there can be no room for accommodating non-performance in any performing arts, and therefore it is reasonable to dismiss this topic as meaningless or irrelevant. Furthermore, the title does not even seem to address the intent of this symposium’s overarching theme: “Changing the Body: Contemporary Training and Performance,” where there is no mention of non-performance. These observations will make it all the more difficult to understand the point of thematizing “non-performance in the performing arts.” To give a hint, however, of how the present topic can be understood in light of the symposium’s theme, it says that if one wants to truly envision “changing the body,” it is not through training and performance, but rather it is through non-performance. My thought is that a thematization of this topic will in turn entail changes in the idea of training and performance, as well. Or, put another way with a slight difference in emphasis, if one wants to envision such a change, one must incorporate a goal of “non-performance” in the idea of training as well as in performance. Although the title may appear to be puzzling to some and perhaps nonsensical to some others, I would like to share with you some of my reflections on the present topic.

At the outset then, I would like to briefly clarify the meaning of the title, “in praise of non-performance in the performing arts.” Everyone can see that I am going to extol a virtue of non-performance in the performing arts. It is correct to see it that way, because that is what I intend to do. In this presentation I am using the term “performance” to mean a series of intentionally designed bodily movements, with the
view to demonstrate artistic techniques or skills to an audience, as are observed in
dancing, acting, martial arts and other performing arts. On the other hand, I am using the
term “non-performance” for now to mean an arresting of the ego-consciousness. With
this brief delineation of the meaning of these terms, the title of my presentation comes to
mean the virtue of arresting the ego-consciousness in the midst of performance.

Before proceeding further, I would like to mention a few practical concerns I have
in addressing the significance of “non-performance in the performing arts.” I hear reports
that many western-trained performers encounter injuries during a practice session, and
consequently in some cases that their injuries cut their lives short as artists. Even if a
performer does not experience an injury, I also hear that the life of a performer is
relatively short; for example, when a performer reaches his/her mid-thirties or early
forties, he/she is forced to retire from a performing career. I find these cases to be
unfortunate and unnecessary, for if a performer can incorporates the idea of “non-
performance in the performing arts” in his/her training and performance, he/she is likely
to experience injuries less frequently and is more likely to prolong his/her life as an artist.

II. A Philosophical Reflection on Introducing Non-Performance

Now, I would like to briefly give a philosophical reflection on why I suggest an
introduction of non-performance in the performing arts. One of the overriding reasons I
would like to topicalize non-performance in this context is to recommend an holistic
approach to training and performance, because an holistic approach is more sound and
healthier than taking a one-sided stance of choosing performance over non-performance,
or vice versa. Behind this move is my belief that unless we understand a performer to be
the whole of an integrated mind and body, training does not prepare a trainee for a fuller
accomplishment in an art form, and neither can a performance achieve its fullest splendor.

In thematizing non-performance, some may think that it can logically be
juxtaposed with performance by assuming that performance and non-performance are
categories which are mutually opposed to each other. In fact, they may think that since
these terms are polar opposites, they are even mutually exclusive of each other. I think
this is one of the reasons why some people may have thought the topic of this
presentation is not significant, and perhaps even irrelevant for the theme of this symposium.

Let us stop here to pause for a reflection. What is the logic that compels these people to judge the above observation as reasonable, and even true? A moment of reflection shows that this judgment is a consequence of applying either-or logic. This logic finds a delight in dividing the whole into two parts, believing that in so doing we can understand the whole of reality, in the present context, what it means to train and perform. According to this logic, it is reasonable to choose performance by rejecting non-performance, particularly when it is coupled with a value judgment that activity is better than inactivity, motion better than stillness.

However, we need to pause here again and question if performance and non-performance are indeed mutually opposing categories. To illustrate this by using a distinction used in Gestalt psychology, they form a figure-ground relationship, but this relation, according to my thinking, resists a separation. In other words, in order for a figure to appear as a figure, there must be non-performance as a background to support it. Without this supporting background, there can be no figure. In this sense, non-performance is more fundamental than performance, although we must note that what becomes a figure, and hence also a background, is fluid; they can change their status depending on a perspective or a thematic intentionality. That is to say, their status can be interchangeable. This leads us to conclude that performance is possible only by assuming non-performance as its foundational background, although there is a difference between one being explicit and the other being implicit. For their meaning, however, both performance and non-performance are mutually dependent on each other. In fact, they are interdependent. Hence, they are connected to each other. Unless we accept this interdependency and interchangeability, we will experience an epistemological dizziness upon observing performance, but the fact that we don’t experience it suggests that the above reasoning must be closer to the truth. An important implication I want to bring up from this reflection is that to choose one by rejecting the other is to fall into one-sidedness. One-sidedness leads to an imbalance, and it shows up in the method of training and performance, not to mention an influence it has on personality formation. My attempt here is to highlight non-performance, because it has been neglected in
training methods and performance, as they are historically understood in the Western tradition. This attempt is philosophically motivated by my thought that one-sidedness of anything violates a cardinal principle of knowing reality, for reality cannot be disclosed in toto unless it is apprehended as a whole.

III. Training the Conscious-Cortex Order

The mode of thinking, guided by either-or logic, entails some, to me undesirable, consequences when it is applied to training and performing. For example, if we are to apply the either-or logical mode of thinking in devising plans for training, one would emphasize a development of the body over that of the mind, while assuming a methodological stance that prioritizes the mind over the body. This method stipulates that the mind is a guide to training, and that the body is a thing that is controlled by the mind. Following this mode of thinking, what it means to perfect an art is accordingly envisioned, whether the perfection pertains to a style, a performing technique or skill. This method is predicated on the belief “I am a master in charge of my body”—a belief that has been fostered in our everyday life since our infancy through a long process of habituating movable parts of our body. Training which follows this method then comes to mean a development of the body by neglecting a fuller development of the mind. This is clearly one-sided, particularly given the experiential fact that we are the whole of an integrated mind and body.

In practical terms, training according to this method specifically means to develop a motor-capacity by habituating the sensory nerve and motor-nerve that is attached to the motor organs. This forms a system dealing with external sensory-motor information. Training of this kind, at the same time, aims at an enhancement of the sensitivity of the sensory-motor nerve that is attached to the tendons, the joints and the muscles, along with a sensation of balance and a dermal sensation. This is a system dealing with kinetic information. Even though there is a difference in awareness between these two information systems—the former occupies a central portion in the field of ego-consciousness, just as thinking and judging do, while the latter appears at the periphery of this field, they are nonetheless confined to what the contemporary Japanese philosopher, YUASA Yasuo, calls “the conscious-cortex order.” The “conscious-cortex order” refers to
a system of information circuits that can be brought to a conscious awareness vis-à-vis the activities of ego-consciousness, such as sensory awareness, thinking and judging in coordination with a motor activity, and they can all be mapped neurophysiologically onto the various areas of the neoencephalon. Training of the conscious-cortex order means a repetition of practice with a view to habituating the body by developing an heightened sensory awareness of the motor organ, while enhancing a capacity of the motor activity.

If one successfully follows this method, the training is considered complete. The completion is marked by an achievement of the capacity of the body, such that it can make judgment on its own without thinking, or without the mind making an intellectual judgment in order to execute a series of intentionally designed bodily movements for the purpose of showing them to an audience. In other words, the culmination of training is characterized by an embodiment of performing techniques or skills to the point that they have become “second nature.” This is because an increased coordination, and hence also a correlativity, is established between the conscious order and the cortex order, and it in fact indicates a higher correlativity than that obtaining in “the state of nature.” This correlativity reflects a higher integration of the mind and the body, where the mind refers to a bearer of the activity of ego-consciousness, while the body is a bearer of that which expresses the activity of the motor organs.

A sense of perfection that is reflective of this method of training can perhaps be symbolically expressed by the phrase, “muscle man.” It captures an image of a well-balanced and well-developed body with the upper torso shaped in an up-side down triangle. In fact, it is often used as a symbolic image to represent an ideal body form cherished in Western culture, as is seen, for example, in the statue of David. This symbolic image is a consequence of following the above methodological stance that emphasizes a development of the body, or more specifically the somatic nerves that are connected to the (distal) motor organs. Generally speaking, this methodological stance is often employed when instructing how to play modern sports, how to dance or how to perform an athletic technique or skill of various kinds. Supporting this stance is a value judgment that activity is better than inactivity, motion better than stillness. According to this model, it seems there is no room for accommodating non-performance either in training or performance. But does this model exemplify the highest splendor which
training and performance can grant a human being? Don’t we have to incorporate both activity and inactivity, both motion and stillness in training and performance if we want to be holistic instead of becoming one-sided?

IV. Training the Unconscious-Autonomic Order

In fact, the foregoing account ignores a vast region of the mind and the body, however, and hence it will be inadequate to prepare a person to embody “non-performance in the performing arts,” for non-performance can occur only if we approach training and performance holistically. A dimension of the mind that is not taken into account is the unconscious, particularly emotions and instincts, while a dimension of the body that is excluded from the preceding account is the activity of the autonomic nervous system, which is closely connected to the generation and expression of emotions and instincts.

YUASA Yasuo uses the phrase “unconscious-autonomic order” to designate the two dimensions of the unconscious and the autonomic nervous system, while contrasting it with the “conscious-cortex order.” According to him, it is an information system which remains for most people, psychologically unconscious, and physiologically autonomous. This is the main reason that this order is not properly addressed in the training that focuses on the “conscious-cortex order” with its methodological emphasis on developing the body, while paying less attention to a development of the mind. One of the main reasons for its negligence lies in the fact that this order cannot be controlled by the will of ego-consciousness, as it works independently of it. For this reason, awareness of this order remains dark and invisible to most people under normal circumstances. However, we must note that since “the unconscious autonomic order” controls the activities of both the mind and the body; for example, a failure of a kidney terminates an individual’s life, it is more fundamental than the “conscious-cortex order.” Consequently, we cannot ignore the “unconscious-autonomic order”; it must be incorporated in the idea of training and performance, if we want to be holistic, particularly when learning to embody “non-performance.” Otherwise, training and performance remain one-sided. On the other hand, if we do incorporate it, it will expand the scope of the meaning of both training and performance. Therefore, training the “unconscious-autonomic order” is necessary for learning to embody non-performance.
Here, we encounter a critical question, however; if the “unconscious-autonomic order” remains psychologically unconscious, and physiologically autonomous, how is it possible to train the unconscious and the autonomic nervous system? This question points to a practical necessity of changing the methodological stance of prioritizing the mind over the body. Instead, we must take a methodological stance of letting the body take precedence over the mind. We must allow the body to speak to the mind, and a conscious mind must learn to listen to the unconscious. In practical terms, an entry into this order will open up through breathing exercises and meditation.

VI. An Entry into the “Unconscious-Autonomic Order”: Breathing and Meditation

A first step to embody non-performance is to learn to enter into the “unconscious-autonomic order,” and this is initially accomplished by performing breathing exercises, for it is capable of establishing a closer correlation between the physiological state (e.g. the autonomic nervous system) and the psychological state (e.g. emotions and instincts). We can easily see a correlativity between them when we compare a peaceful state with an angry state, and discern a marked difference in the rhythm, the pattern, and the rate of breathing between them. Breathing exercises establish a higher degree of correlation between the unconscious and the autonomic nervous system, which cannot otherwise be achieved by following the previous methodological stance. Specifically, it establishes a harmonious, competitive balance between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nerves by creating a wider amplitude between them. For this purpose, abdominal breathing is recommended because it naturally produces a clam state of stillness, due to a stimulation of the parasympathetic nerves gathered around the diaphragm. It promotes the “conscious-cortex order” to be unified with the “unconscious-autonomic order,” while bringing this unity to a clear awareness. This point can be brought out more clearly in our next topic, meditation.

Meditation is a vital process to embody non-performance, because it allows its practitioner to step into the “unconscious-autonomic order” with a more clear awareness than the breathing exercises can afford us. In meditation, a disengagement from the external world occurs by arresting the activities of sensory organs and motor organs. Meditation suspends and brings to a halt the activity of “the conscious-cortex order,” and
in this sense it is a form of practicing non-performance. The mind in meditation initially busies itself with an object arising out of the unconscious in the form of wandering thoughts and images. That is, contents of the unconscious start surfacing in the field of meditative awareness, because the “unconscious-autonomic order” works autonomously independent of the will of ego-consciousness. Erupting into the field of meditative awareness are emotional complexes or delusions, which are like bubbles of a carbonated drink attempting to escape into open air. Dissipation of the bubbles results in the dissolution of emotional complexes, and thereby restores an emotional balance toward a more holistic organization of the individual as it contributes to the stabilization of emotional energy. Becoming aware of how an emotion surfaces, and how it dissipates and how it becomes stabilized all indicate a process of establishing a stronger unity of the conscious-cortex order with the unconscious-autonomic order, a consequence of which results in an achievement of an holistic integration of the mind and the body to a higher degree.

This point is significant for embodying “non-performance in the performing arts,” because an emotional complex can hinder progress in training as well as upsetting a performance. Under normal circumstances emotions are suppressed by the activity of ego-consciousness, and they ordinarily exist latently in the background of the field of ego-consciousness; they are situated in the intermediary region between consciousness and the unconscious. However, when they are triggered by a surrounding condition, they surface in the center field of ego-consciousness. In fact, when one experiences an emotion, it holistically affects a whole person, although there is a degree to this affection depending upon the intensity of the emotion. Because of this holistic affection however, it will make it difficult to form a proper intellectual judgment as well as a bodily movement, when one is overtaken by an emotion. Generally speaking, this is an issue related to personality formation, i.e. a pattern of emotional response that is unconsciously fostered by “one’s likes and dislikes.” This is where we find a merit of meditation for training and performance, because meditation helps to nurture a well-built mind, just as the development of the motor organs help to construct a well-built body. Yuasa characterize such a mind as:iv
A well-built mind is that mind which does not fall into the state of anxiety or that mind which is not swayed by whatever situation one is placed in. It is a mind which is not swayed by emotion and desire. …It is also a mind which does not pose a conflict to others, but harmonizes with them, while enveloping them.

Meditation then has goals of forming an all-around personality by gaining control over one’s emotions and instincts, and of creating a greater caliber to accommodate others with compassion.

Now I would like to offer a philosophical reflection on the methodological stance that is employed in learning to embody “non-performance.” As mentioned in the foregoing, in order to train the “unconscious-autonomic order,” one assumes the stance of letting the body take precedence over the mind. This is a move to return via breathing exercises and meditation to the primordial ground of what it means to be human, including what it means to be a trainer, trainee, and performer. This returning enables the human being to understand him/herself as part and parcel of living nature, where the human being comes to be seen as a “being-in-nature.” With this understanding, one comes to a realization that the activity and function of one’s “unconscious-autonomic order” is made to be alive and is sustained if and only if there is an assistance and support by an invigorating activity of living nature. Any activity, any motion we observe in living nature always returns to the primordial state of nature that is stillness, from which springs forth its creative activity and expression. Just as living nature returns to a primordial source for its creative activity and expression, we return to the same primordial source through meditation that is the practice of non-performance. This is where we find a philosophical reason for incorporating “non-performance in the performing arts.”

V. Non-Performance: Stillness in Motion and Motion in Stillness

Now I would like to address specifically what it means to embody non-performance, by describing a certain meditation state. Meditation enables its practitioner to experience a state known as “stillness in motion”—a phrase used in Zen Buddhism to designate a state of non-performance. Since this phrase provides us to probe into what it means to embody non-performance, we need to bring the phrase closer to the terms we have already used so far. That is, if we take motion to refer to “performance,” while stillness refers to non-
performance, we can translate the phrase “stillness in motion” as “non-performance in performance,” the topic of this presentation. In the phrase, “stillness in motion,” motion refers to a modality of the body, for example, the body that executes performing techniques, while stillness refers to a modality of the mind, i.e. a deep meditative state. An art of embodying non-performance is suggested in this phrase, in which we can see the mind achieving stillness, while at the same time letting the body be in full motion. Consequently, “stillness in motion” means to execute a bodily movement with the stillness of the mind, where this stillness cannot be experienced as long as the ego-conscious mind is still operative. For this reason, the ego-conscious mind must be rendered inoperative. This is the first sense of what it means to embody non-performance.

However, in characterizing the modality of the mind expressive of “non-performance,” we cannot take stillness to be a simple stillness, that is, the stillness which is juxtaposed with, and in opposition to, motion, because it will fall into the traps of either-or logic. To signal this point, Zen further says: “motion in stillness,” which describes a state of mind, including the surrounding conditions seen from this state of mind. Accordingly, stillness predicated on the mind in the phrase “stillness in motion” is not a simple stillness; it is in motion as well! What is being asserted here is that the mind is in stillness, but it is also in motion. And yet it is not in motion but it is in stillness. In order words, to demonstrate non-performance, one cannot be steeped either in motion or in stillness. If we are to analyze this state of affairs by using the active-passive scheme while presupposing either-or logic as its *modus operandi* for understanding, this state appears to be contradictory or confused, to say the least. For example, according to the active-passive scheme, the mind is either active or passive, but they cannot be both active and passive, or neither active nor passive. Yet, this is what is necessary to understand by what it means to embody non-performance; the mind is both active and passive, and it is at the same time neither active nor passive!

This is a rather difficult state to characterize in words. However, as this is one of the important senses of non-performance I have in mind in thematizing “non-performance” in reference to the performing arts, I need to give a sense of what it means to say that the mind is in stillness, and yet it is in motion; or the mind is not in motion, and yet it is in stillness. To illustrate this point, if you can picture a top spinning at a very
fast speed, you can imagine that the top as a whole is in full motion, but the shaft sustaining the top is absolutely still. Zen Master Takuan writes in describing an excelled swordsman’s mind as “immovable,” such that it can move any direction it desires. The above analogy and Takuan’s description capture a sense of the mind that is in stillness and in motion, while at the same time showing that the body is in full motion. Stillness is in the absolute dead center, which is of the mind, and from which motion emanates, wherein there is no separation of the mind from the body, because a human being is an *integrated* whole of both the mind and the body.

Now, how about the case in which the mind is neither in motion nor in stillness? This is also an extremely difficult state of affairs to characterize in words. Since it equally bears an important sense of the non-performance I have in mind, I need to briefly give a sense of the mind being neither in motion nor in stillness. This state discloses a practical transcendence of the duality between motion and stillness, which is achieved by trans-descending into the depths of one’s *psychē vis-à-vis* meditation practice. An experiential correlate to this trans-descendence is a non-dualistic orientation towards things in nature, including the relationship between a performer and his/her performance, and between a performer and an audience. Non-dualistic means a dualistic distinction between the mind and the body has disappeared. If the distinction has disappeared in regard to oneself, it also means, for example, that there will be no barrier that separates a performer from the audience.

Zeami, who systematized Noh drama, writes about an ideal, ultimate state of a performer as embodying “no mind.” “No-mind” refers to the mind of a matured performer. It does not project a personal unconscious content, nor does it superimpose ideas or categories in perceiving things. Moreover, what is pertinent about “no-mind” for performance is that no discrepancy exists between the activity of the mind and the activity of the performing body. According to Yuasa, “‘no-mind’ is a condition in which even the movement of the mind which attempts to perform has disappeared.” This is because the artist’s “body” has learned all the necessary bodily performing techniques, and hence there is no need for the mind to enter into the bodily performance *per se*. When an artist performs in the state of “no mind,” Zeami speaks of such experiences as “seeing detached from [one’s own perspective of] seeing” (*riken no ken*) and “seeing
[one’s performance] wherein the place of seeing is the same as that of the audience seeing the performance” (kensho dōken no ken). These are experiences indicative of non-performance, in which a performer and an audience become one harmonious whole.

VI. Concluding Remarks

In the foregoing I have suggested an incorporation of non-performance in the performing arts by first discussing what it means to train the conscious-cortex order, while noting its methodological limitations. As a way of overcoming the conscious-cortex order, I have briefly discussed how one can enter into the “unconscious-autonomic order” by way of breathing exercises and meditation. I have made this suggestion in order to overcome a one-sidedness of addressing only the “conscious-cortex order” in training and performance, as this incorporation brings about a change in the orientation and perspective one takes toward training and performance. To close my presentation, I would like to share with you one of the consequences of incorporating the unconscious-autonomic order in training and performance.

When one trains the “conscious-cortex order,” it has a primary goal of showing a performance to an audience, wherein a concern for a performer himself or herself is rendered secondary. This is for example what Aristotle had in mind when he mentions the catharsis that is engendered among the audience when observing a tragedy. On the other hand, what I have proposed to show was a method of holistically integrating the “conscious-cortex order” and the “unconscious-autonomic order.” In this case, this method becomes the performer’s primary concern, and becomes a thematic focus in training as well as in performance. It has an ethical and/or spiritual goal of perfecting one’s personality, even though the aspect of showing a performance to an audience is not completely neglected in this case either, because all of the performing arts presuppose the presence of an audience.

To bring my presentation to a close, I would like to offer the following reflection. Going into the unconscious-autonomic order is a long and arduous process during which the practitioner may adversely be affected by one’s own psychological constitution as well as that of others. Moreover, it will demand from the practitioner a total dedication and commitment, and for this reason, only a few people may have the courage and
determination to go through the process. In spite of these difficulties, there is undoubtedly light shining at each step of the way, whose power can no longer be confined to the area of artistic performance, but extends to all aspects of human existence to help and even save people.

Thank you for your attention and patience!

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i Under normal circumstances, the circuit of kinesthesis is apprehended as a general condition of one’s body, together with an apprehension of the activity of the visceral organs.

ii Here, we need to have a clearer understanding of what it means to embody both the intellectual and somatic knowledge. Yuasa points out that the repetition involves a somatization of bodily forms, where somatization means an incorporation of kinetic memory in one’s own body in connection with how one trains one’s emotion and instinct. I will deal with the emotion-instinct a little more fully later, because they are not consciously addressed in the idea of training designed for developing the motor organs.

iii This phrase was proposed by Professor Eliot Deutsch of the University of Hawaii, under whom I studied when I was a graduate student in the department of philosophy.
