

Bio-kinetic Tension:

Loving tension, because with out tension there is no movement; without movement there is no life

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Tension (Webster's Unabridged Dictionary Second Edition):

*A tensing or being tensed. Mental or nervous strain often accompanied by muscular tautness. A state of strained relations, uneasiness due to mutual hostility. A device for making something Tense or taut as thread in a sewing machine. An electro motive force. Electric potential
Potential difference. Stress on material produced by the pull against the resistance of the material.*

Release (Webster's Unabridged Dictionary Second Edition):

The act of releasing, liberating, or freeing from restraint, confinement or servitude: the state of being released; liberation. Liberation or freeing from pain, care, trouble, grief, or other evil. A written discharge, as from an obligation, from prison, etc. letting go of something caught, held in position etc.



Illustration by Ann de Vere

Tension is the word that defines an entire bio-physical system. It is the name we call our physical and mental electric system, our "electro motive force." It is the way we use our energy to move our body with conscious direction and the way every cell of our body moves itself autonomically. Energy is the fuel and tension is the name we give to energy as it moves through our body to produce movement. We articulate tension within the body, we can even interfere with our subconscious, automatic movement, i.e. holding our breath. We use tension to hold the body in place, or still, or to move the body through space. Our integrating, coordinating brain uses tension to interrelate, coordinate and permit an incredible variety and choice of movement.

Release is a part of tension. Release is one of the possible ways we may choose to use our tension. Our freedom to use the full galaxy of our tension system depends on our genetic gifts, functional use, hereditary endowment, cultural environment. It is part of our life history on every level; including emotionally, kinetically, physically; on a micro or macro level, from cellular to our total body/mind/spirit life.

We are always involved in the struggle between two opposing forces, gravity and levity. "Levity is a hypothetical force formally believed to be inherent in certain bodies. Levity is also a tendency to rise by the action of such a force." (Webster's unabridged dictionary, second edition.) Our tension balances gravity and levity. It cannot change gravity so tension changes and adjusts levity so that we can stand and even

jump, or leap. As gravity lessens we float. In the absence of all gravity we would float outward into space. Tension is the force that can resist the magnetic force of gravity. When we release out tension totally we collapse, we literally give in to gravity. Gravity is always pulling us towards the earth's center. In rising from the ground we feel the pull of gravity and the energy necessary to resist gravity.

Kinds or Elements of Tension: Speed, Quantity and Direction

There are many kinds of tension within our one body: from the internal molecular level through the visceral, skeletal, muscular and neurological. We may articulate our tension as a response to emotional experience, or to physical happenings.

We have choices in all the elements of tension. We each have our own scale of speed, our own amount or quantity of tension possibilities, and the ability to direct it to any part of our body. Within the (amount) scale of tension we can choose to use zero % which equals collapse or to use 100% 3 dimensional tension. We may vary the speed of tension from the split second reaction of a reflex, to an infinitely slow exquisitely controlled breath; or as in the discipline of Yoga, slow down even our heart beat. We can direct any amount of tension to any part of our body including one tiny molecule or cell; or one part of our body, our little finger, the lower lid of our eye, or to our entire body simultaneously or successively. We can develop or ignore this resource. We can work within the center of our tension boundaries or explore the edges.

Each culture and civilization explores the tension and the energy of their physical kinetic being and its relation to their minds, emotions and spirit. Different cultures have developed taboos or an emphasis on or use of particular parts or qualities of their tension systems. This includes all the cultural attitudes towards touching: as simple as, for example, a handshake. How much tension do you use and when do you release a handshake? If you use a firm handshake in one culture you communicate honesty, directness, trustworthiness: in another culture you are seen as overbearing, intrusive, dominating. We are taught early to restrain / restrict / control our body's desire to move.

Ways Of Using Tension

CENTER: The place where your body can sustain itself independently with the least amount of tension. The place where your body can just BE. Standing is a balancing act of skeletal alignment sustained by the tonicity of the muscles. In a healthy body we are always moving from contraction to some form of release or letting go or relaxation.

RELEASE: is a word that describes a particular use of our tension system. It is a part of the whole bio-kinetic physical system called tension. It is the action of changing tension levels from a high level to a lower level; its intensity can vary from a sudden explosive letting go of whatever state of tension you are in, to a gentle release at any speed. You can choose the dynamics of a release by using the elements of speed and quality. We can release any part of our body, but the release and contraction need to be balanced. In order to inhale we must use tension to draw in the air; to exhale we release our breath.

FROZEN: Sending energy constantly to one or more parts of the body in order to maintain a position. It is very difficult and a great skill to be able to "hold one shoulder in a raised position above its center" for long periods of time, although not often desirable.

SOMATISING: expressing a feeling kinetically or physical that you cannot express verbally like gritting, grinding (sometimes a use of tension to express emotional feelings) your teeth, or clenching your jaws.

IRRELEVANT: tensing some part of the body. Producing a movement that does not help or hinder an action, i.e. frowning, tensing the eyebrows; biting the lip; tapping the foot or fingers.

EXPRESSIVE: tapping the foot or fingers; holding your tongue; sighing, caressing, striking out; smiling, frowning (contracting), laughing,(releasing); dancing, singing; or to fulfill an internalized emotional body image.

EMPATHETIC: tension used to express love for another by copying and internalizing their tension patterns: or dislike of another by rebelling against their tension patterns.

ECCENTRIC: extension tension (my favorite): lengthening / elongating the muscle is a way of contracting which narrows the muscle 3 dimensionally, (elongating, and stretching the muscles). The eccentric contraction; instead of shortening the muscles we use our tension to stretch the muscles. This kind of tension develops a flexible, panther like body.

CONTRACTION: We can also contract, by shortening and widening our muscles.

RESIDUAL: tension left in the musculature as a result of previous actions.

CONFLICTING: our bodies may demand different or conflicting amounts or kinds of tension: from the internal molecular level through the visceral, skeletal, muscular, psychological, emotional. Holding our breath may conflict with our need to exhale.

COMPENSATORY: We can develop an asymmetrical use of tension in order to adjust to or compensate for: injuries, or functional discrepancies or genetic development, organic problems or neurological misalignment, or as an emotional expression. Misalignment may be caused by the thyroid, chronic fatigue syndrome, neuropathy, or skeletal asymmetry (as in scoliosis). Any of these problems and others may cause excess use of tension, or compensatory tension. They may require an asymmetrical use of tension in order to balance or to move.

INAPPROPRIATE: Excessive; using more tension than is necessary for the movement; or so much that the movement cannot be accomplished. Trying to lift an elephant with only enough energy for a tea cup or lifting a tea cup with enough energy to lift an elephant.

INTERNAL AUTONOMIC SELF-MASSAGING: The human body through the constant use of its tension system is an interrelated complete massage system. During inhalation the diaphragm stretches, expands itself down and widens, drawing air into the bronchial tubes and the lungs: exhaling we release this tension allowing the air to flow out and the diaphragm to release to its centered relaxed position. As a by-product of this action, the diaphragm massages the esophagus, the stomach, the main artery, the internal organs all the way down to our perineum. When we hold our breath, we interfere with this lovely, mutually beneficial process.

Loving My Tension: Or How To Care For Your Tension

I love my tension so I give it lots of Vitamin B, especially B 12 and Folic Acid. I listen for proprioceptive signals to balance calcium and protein for the energy to flow through my muscles and be able to confidently release and give me the most movement for the least tension. I ought to treat my adrenaline system better but I do love that one cup of coffee.

I give it lots of chances to be intense, fast, stretch, contract, expand, articulate, extend, release, relax, collapse and respond. It is always greedy for movement so my tension loves to dance, swim, wiggle & squiggle. We need to move every muscle, every joint often without pain, as a way to stay healthy.

As a choreographer I want dancers to understand and experience the full scale of all the elements of their tension. Dancers need safety through alignment and flexibility and an understanding of their own bodies. They need to explore and experience the totality and the edges of their own dance. I love a dancers' vocabulary to include the intelligent development of high extensions, long extensions, responsiveness in improvisation, endurance, daring, leaps, falls and to have experiential confidence in the pre-thought swiftness of their reflexes.

An excerpt from the chapter on Tension from a book in progress "Kinetic Awareness: Understanding and Loving Your Body" copyright 1999

Elaine Summers has a website: <http://www.elainesummersdance.com/>
and a wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elaine_Summers