

# Three Exercises derived from Ankoku Butoh Training Practices to Develop a 'Martial Presence'

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## Abstract

This article discusses the potential benefits of the training practices of the Japanese psychophysical discipline of *ankoku butoh* in assisting practitioners of the martial arts to develop a 'martial presence'. The exercises presented at the end of the article are derived from my PhD (Griffith University) research thesis: "De-domesticating the Actor: Applying *ankoku butoh*'s training process of de-domestication to develop presence in western actor training through experiences of awareness, discipline and energy", which was chiefly concerned with the construction of a suite of exercises derived from *ankoku butoh* training practices to develop presence in actors. Beginning with an examination of the techniques and principles of *ankoku butoh* in relation to its training process of 'de-domestication' and its attendance to the elements of awareness, discipline, and energy, the article continues with a discussion of the 'being present' and 'having presence' states in acting and the martial arts, before concluding with three suggested training exercises specifically aimed at martial artists that may prove beneficial in developing a 'martial presence'.

**Keywords:** martial arts, *ankoku butoh*, awareness, discipline, energy.

## Introduction

*Ankoku butoh* or "utter blackness/darkness dance" (Fraleigh, 2010, p. 67) is a bodymind integration method created by Japanese dancer Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986) in the 1950s. This article posits that it is *ankoku butoh*'s training process of 'de-domestication' and its attendance to the elements of awareness, discipline, and energy, that is central to the development of presence in its practitioners, and further, that its training methods can be equally applied across the performing arts and the martial arts. Throughout, I draw on personal training experiences of techniques and principles taught by Japanese teachers of *ankoku butoh* with a direct training lineage to its founder, Hijikata Tatsumi. The article is further approached from my perspective as a professional actor and martial artist (3rd Dan black belt in *Shotokai* karate), with the understanding that *ankoku butoh* shares many of the training principles of the martial arts. The benefits of 'being present' and 'having presence' in acting are evident,

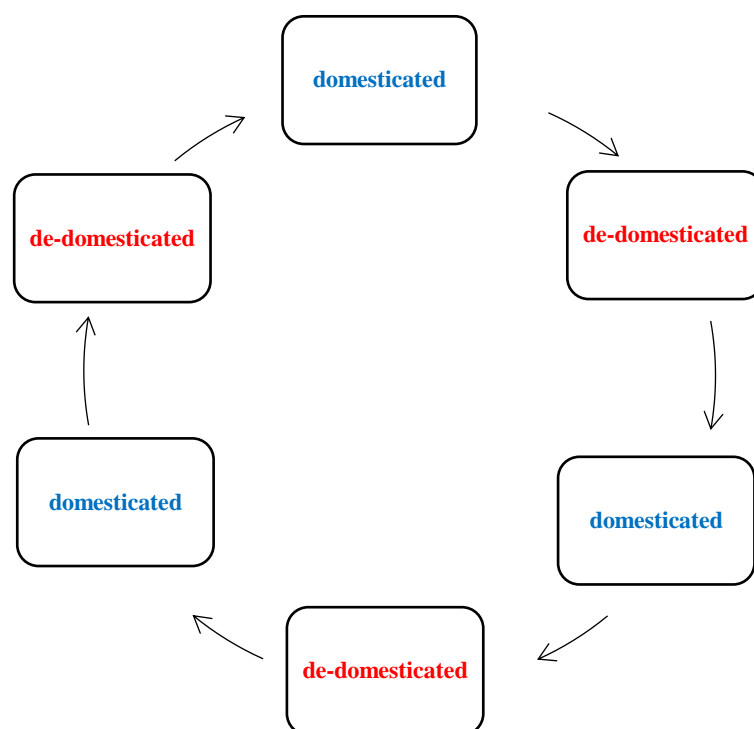
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however, in a martial arts competition environment, being able to enter these dual presence states, can mean the difference between winning and losing, even more so in a self-defense situation, where being ‘in the moment’ and projecting a powerful presence could literally mean the difference between life and death.

### De-domestication in Ankoku Butoh

*Ankoku butoh* is aimed at developing presence in its practitioners through its training process of ‘de-domestication’, with its focus on awareness, discipline and energy. The term de-domestication can be defined as “the deliberate establishment of a population of domesticated animals or plants in the wild” (Gamborg et al., 2010, p. 57), however, for the purpose of this article, I view de-domestication as a practice experience that entails a re-assessment of ‘domesticated’ or acquired cognitive and physical processes in relation to a practitioner’s presence in space and time. Zen Master Seigen’s philosophical observation that, “before the practice, mountains are mountains, during the practice, mountains are not mountains, and after the realization, mountains are [truly] mountains [again]” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006, “Zen as Anti-Philosophy”, para. 2), is reflected in *ankoku butoh*’s process of de-domestication, in which the body begins in a domesticated state, enters a de-domestication state, whereby it becomes accustomed to alternative cognitive processes and physical modes of action and movement, eventually becoming once again, domesticated. Thus, the cycle continues indefinitely, as demonstrated in the diagram below:



**Fig. 1.** Cycle of domestication and de-domestication.

Hijikata did not regard movements such as standing or walking as natural, but rather acquired movements, domesticated by society and “trained to function within specific patterns – beginning the moment we are born” (Kurihara, 1996, p. 98). Thus, in his quest to de-domesticate the body and develop a practitioner’s authentic presence, *ankoku butoh* was

created to “enable the body and mind to do more than it had been able to do before” (Baird, 2012, p.7). Essentially, Hijikata was in “the business of human rehabilitation” (Fraleigh and Nakamura, 2006, p. 43). Baird (2012) contends that *ankoku butoh* training techniques are not entirely “bodily techniques, but also include many things that might be termed mental techniques” (p. 6). Hijikata de-domesticated ‘natural’ movements and thought processes before assigning them new names, thereby making these developed movements and processes ‘exist’, and subsequently, expected his *deshi* (disciples) to “physicalize that new existence” (Morishita, 2015, p. 62). Hijikata further compelled his *deshi* to forego any previous understanding of the words he used to name these movements and processes and to accept the new meanings he appropriated to the practice. For the purpose of developing presence, *ankoku butoh* practitioners are required to consistently immerse themselves in such re-evaluation practices.

It is repetition that cultivates discipline and, as in the martial arts, the use of repetition plays a significant role in *ankoku butoh*’s de-domestication process, in which an action is repeatedly practiced and/or sustained for an extended duration in order to become embedded into a practitioner’s ‘body catalogue’. Greek philosopher, Aristotle theorised that “it is frequent repetition that produces a natural tendency” (Aristotle and Ross, 1906, p. 113). The logging of a movement or action into one’s ‘body catalogue’ aligns with Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) contention that “a movement is learned when the body has understood it” (p. 139). As a movement often varies each time it is executed or experienced, repetition is advantageous for perfecting technique and response times, encouraging a practitioner to fully engage with their bodymind and, in the process, expand their psychophysical horizons. Repetitive and durational exercises further develop 360-degree awareness resulting in an increased alertness to even the most minute of changes within a practitioner’s body and the space in which their body is present. Neurotheology pioneer Dr. Andrew Newberg posits that “repeated performance of an action creates a mental blueprint causing a formation of subtle electrical pathways in the brain, somewhat like the grooves in a phonograph record” (Florio and Leeman, 2014). Therefore, ‘regrooving’, or changing the ‘grooves’ in the ‘record’ of your brain is possible through the repetitive practise of new movements or actions. As such, the de-domestication process repositions Merleau-Ponty’s “habitual body” (Moya, 2014, p. 2) against the ‘present body’. The ‘habitual body’ could be viewed as a state of becoming accustomed to habitual behaviour, such as tapping your fingers. The ‘present body’ however, recognises the habit of tapping your fingers, and subsequently, seeks to change the habit by ‘regrooving’ the brain to cease the habit. The body is always present. It is the mind that fluctuates between present, past and future. By reconfiguring and consolidating the body and mind, the new bodymind determines time as present, thus the *ankoku butoh* practitioner is in a perpetual state of ‘being present’.

### **Presence in the Performing/Martial Arts**

The concept of presence has been explored by acting researchers and practitioners as an integral part of the acting training process. Trenos (2014) regards presence as the “ultimate enigma of acting” (p. 64). Goodall (2008) similarly views presence as the “supreme attribute for an actor” (p. 17) and describes it as a combination of “training and technical prowess” (p. 8) and “mysterious qualities of magnetism and mesmerism” (ibid). Power (2008) asserts that presence is manifested through an actor’s “manipulation of space and materials, including his own body and posture” (p. 49), while Riley (1997) views ‘presence’ through the lens of Japanese and Chinese performance contexts as a “raw energy of life itself as manifested in the actor’s body” (p. 316). Although presence may refer to numerous experiences and circumstances, this article further contributes to theories on presence through its clarification of the states of ‘being present’ and ‘having presence’ and contends that an actor (or martial

artist) cannot 'have presence' without first learning how to 'be present'. Lutterbie's observation that 'being present' refers to being "in the moment" (as cited in McConachie and Hart, 2006, p. 154) aligns with this paper's definition of 'being present', while 'having presence' could be regarded as 're-present-ing' an actor or martial artist's elevated authentic self.

Research into the use of martial arts techniques for developing presence in actors includes the work of actor trainer and martial artist Phillip Zarrilli, who claims that the training practices of the martial arts and the performing arts are inextricably linked, as "all of the things that a martial artist does, an actor needs to be able to do" (DojoTV, 2018). Camurri and Zecca's (2015) study to verify the existence of "Presence Energy" (p. 431), conducted using Asian martial arts training methods and other physical exercises, suggests that specific martial arts techniques can enhance an actor's presence. Dare (2013) investigates the benefits of karate training in developing presence in actors and maintains that it is karate's focus on control and awareness that "is the foundation" (p. 6) of presence development. Frank's (2006) contention that tai chi training "evokes an ideal type of martial skill, as well as an ideal type of person" (p. 51), suggests a relationship between tai chi and the development of presence in its practitioners.

Martial artist and movie star Bruce Lee, considered the martial arts to be a method for "honestly expressing yourself" (Bertamirans, 2015). Lee was also a respected teacher who taught martial arts to numerous Hollywood actors, including Steve McQueen and James Coburn, so that they could learn how "to express themselves, through some movement" (ibid). Lee described his teaching method as "un-acting acting or acting un-acting" (ibid), which consisted of a blend of "control" and "natural instinct", implying that an actor should be 'in the moment' while simultaneously maintaining an awareness of being 'in the moment'. Another bodymind discipline concerned with the development of presence through the training of the elements of awareness, discipline, and energy is *Shintaido* or "new body way" (Aoki, 1982, p. 1), which has its roots in the traditional karate style of *Shotokai*. *Shintaido* was developed in the 1960s by former *Shotokai* exponent Aoki Hiroyuki and an eclectic group of martial artists, actors and musicians who aimed to discover their authentic presence through "a unique system of body movement based upon martial art expression" (p. 2). *Shintaido*'s training ethos has several elements in common with *ankoku butoh*, including an emphasis on developing "energetic awareness" (Pacific Shintaido, n.d., "How is Shintaido similar to other martial arts?") and the use of *kata* to develop "body-mind discipline" (ibid). A further similarity to *ankoku butoh* is *Shintaido*'s teaching method of 'action learning' or "kinesthetic intelligence" (Candelario, 2010, p. 96), whereby students learn techniques by copying the movements of the teacher and through the observation of other students. This approach is in contrast to the typical Western teaching method which is an amalgamation of both kinaesthetic and verbal intelligences, that provides opportunities for students to ask questions. Action learning/kinaesthetic intelligence assists in the development of self-awareness, an important attribute of presence, as a student is encouraged not to search for answers from the teacher, but rather to look inward. Consequently, the process of self-reflection begins with the body and ends with the body.

Baird (2012) contends that Hijikata incorporated techniques from various martial arts into the formation of his *ankoku butoh*, and that his interest in specific martial arts stances appeared to be "in part as hints to multiaxial bodily positions" (p.153). The term *kata* is most commonly used in martial arts, however, because of Hijikata's usage of formulated movements arranged in a set pattern designed to embed techniques through constant repetition, this article applies the term when referring to particular *ankoku butoh* training techniques. The use of formalised techniques in *ankoku butoh* training utilises several of the characteristics of traditional karate *kata*, particularly the applications of *shinshuku* (expansion and contraction), *kyoujaku* (strong and weak) and *kankyū* (quick and slow). Operating within a well-rehearsed structured pattern,

as in *kata*, is efficacious to flow, the complete engagement in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), as a practitioner is not required to think about what they are doing. However, if improvisation is to be utilised, it should be “choreographic improvisation” (Fraser, 2014, p. 30), in which choreography acts as a structuring device to focus on a specific area of the body or a particular range of movement. When engaging in any movement, the body naturally seeks structure. By providing structure beforehand, a practitioner can more rapidly enter a present state, as the need to search for structure has been eliminated. Thus, providing a framework in which a practitioner is able to improvise within certain parameters, encourages them to ‘be present’. As with *ankoku butoh*, the first stage in karate training is the development of awareness, in which a student is introduced to alternative ways of using their body. Next, they practise these new movements in a repetitive and durational manner, thus developing discipline. Finally, they learn how to apply these techniques through the controlled distribution and projection of energy. The final result is a *karate-ka* (karate practitioner) with the ability to not only ‘be present’ in a self-defense situation, but also to ‘have presence’, which, depending on its intensity, may enable them to ward off an attack in the first place.

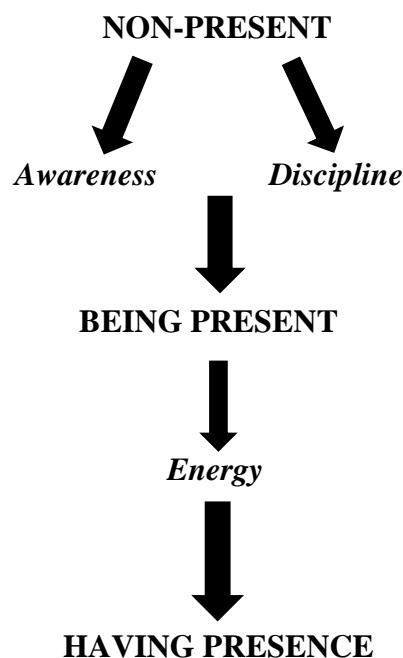
### The Formula for Developing Presence

Borrowing theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold’s (1874 –1940) formulaic approach (Hodge, 2010, p. 28) to his Biomechanics acting method, the suggested formula for developing presence (as defined by the states of ‘being present’ and ‘having presence’) via the de-domestication process is as follows:

$$\mathbf{P} = \mathbf{A} + \mathbf{D} + \mathbf{E}$$

(**P** = presence; **A** = awareness; **D** = discipline; **E** = energy)

The below diagram outlines the de-domestication process for developing the ‘being present’ and ‘having presence’ states beginning with a ‘non-present’ state.



**Fig. 2.** Presence formula.

### Three Exercises for Developing a Martial Presence

Although there has been research conducted into the use of martial arts training techniques to develop presence in actors, research into the benefits of actor training methods, such as *ankoku butoh*, to develop presence in martial artists is limited. In 2019, I was invited to conduct two workshops, utilising exercises derived from my PhD research, at a self-defense and personal security facility (CSO Tactical Training Centre) in Queensland, Australia. Subsequently, the participants were introduced to several exercises specifically aimed at developing a 'martial presence'. The response to the workshops was unanimously positive, as demonstrated in post-workshop testimonials received from the participants attesting to the effectiveness of the exercises. Following are three of the exercises employed during the workshops addressing the elements of awareness, discipline, and energy, which I consider to be essential in the development of the dual states of 'being present' and 'having presence'.

#### Awareness

Ankoku butoh exercises are designed to develop sensory, physical and spatial awareness by focussing attention on seldom considered areas of the body, and its various functions. The process of de-domestication further involves the use of exercises engaged in 'swapping senses', whereby consciousness is not necessarily considered to be located in the brain but can be transferred to any part of the body. Newberg claims "that consciousness resides in every cell of our body" (Florio and Leeman, 2014). By redistributing primary consciousness from the brain centre to various parts of the body, facilitates the process of taking on new, non-habitual movements as "the body does not know physics" (Fraser, 2014, p. 45). In the practice of *ankoku butoh*, a hand can see as clearly as an eye, just as a nose can hear as well as an ear, depending on where consciousness has been temporarily placed. Hijikata regarded the back to be as powerful and communicative as the front of the body and believed that performers had been domesticated not to use their back in performance. Consequently, Hijikata "wanted to elevate the back of the dancer to a status as an equal or preferred agent of performance" (Baird, 2012, p. 39), in order to develop a more complete presence. The deliberate transference of consciousness through the reassignment of a particular sense, for instance, by assigning the sense of sight to the back, allows it to take on the same characteristics as the front of the body, thus resulting in a more complete psychophysical presence. The shifting of senses is further aimed at clarifying areas of consciousness in what Merleau-Ponty refers to as being "caught up in the ambiguity of corporeality" (Garner, 1993, p. 448), thereby assisting in cultivating a greater awareness of the body, itself.

#### Exercise 1: Shifting Senses

The de-domestication of the senses as applied in the Shifting Senses exercise, is aimed at consciously activating an awareness of a martial artist's psychophysical presence. The exercise is further designed to increase focus and concentration, as the martial artist navigates an environment with their various 'eyes', encouraging them to remain in a continual state of 'being present' in the space

Instructions:

- 1) Begin in a standing position.

- 2) 'Remove' your eyes one at a time and attach them to your feet. Keep your actual eyes half-closed throughout. You no longer see with these eyes.
- 3) Begin walking with your feet-eyes. With each step, the eyes open and close as you raise and lower each foot. Explore the space for several minutes with your feet-eyes.
- 4) Remove the eyes from your feet and place them on the palms of your hands. Open and close your hands as if you are opening and closing your actual eyes. Explore the space for several minutes with your hand-eyes.
- 5) Remove the eyes from your hands and place them on your back. These eyes now become one large single eye. Explore the space for several minutes with your back-eye.
- 6) Return your eyes to their original position. Continue exploring the room maintaining an awareness of your new heightened sense of sight.

## Discipline

A fundamental training technique of the de-domestication process is the use of various alternative modes of walking, which Kurihara (1996) contends "is the foundation of the *butoh* body" (p. 109). Zarrilli observes that daily activities "such as walking, driving, hygienic practises often become habitualised and routinized" (Martial Arts Studies, 2016), therefore, a focus on daily acquired habitual movements and gestures subsequently heightens awareness of these actions. Walking exercises require a psychophysical disciplinary approach to facilitate the physical challenges of each walk while maintaining an awareness of any associated imagery. Acute attention to maintaining form and an awareness of the 'hybrid moments' between the transition from one walk to another requires a continual hyper-focus aimed at developing flow, a necessary component of the 'being present' state. *Ankoku butoh* walks could be considered a form of walking meditation, which Hann (1995) regards as "live training to keep your mind in the present moment" (p. 37). The walks assist in developing both personal and ensemble discipline as practitioners need to maintain a particular position for a sustained period of time while using their peripheral vision to remain in alignment with others walking alongside of them.

As each walk is conducted at a different tempo, this further encourages different experiences of the present time, in which the practitioners are moving. Ravid (2014) suggests that, through the juxtaposition of "exercises with different temporal structures we can expose the ways in which time is experienced and marked on the body in practice" (p. 207). Subsequently, by adopting alternative methods of movement, practitioners are able to explore different physical pathways to consciousness, as they transfer their presence from one walk to the next. The notion of 'being present' is synonymous with the here and now, yet, how we perceive time challenges this concept. The slowing down and speeding up of movement is aimed at exploring different perceptions of present time, thus creating a greater awareness of what it means to 'be present'. Focussing on a specific image while self-correcting technique, encourages flow, and assists in suspending any physical discomfit that might be experienced until after an activity has ended. The walks further develop the discipline necessary in applying tension in a focussed manner, extending on Dresner's (2019) discussion that "focus and concentration could be synonyms for discipline" (p. 59). Ultimately, the discipline associated with the various walks generates a stronger sense of self, and encourages a practitioner to experiment with alternative ways of generating movement and to experience and discover sensations from unconventional perspectives. Moreover, through the dynamics of the movement, tempo and rhythm, the body is able to fully present in the space.

## Exercise 2: Reverse Walk

The Reverse Walk exercise is a modified form of the traditional Japanese walking method of *namba aruki* which employs a right arm, right leg, left arm, left leg motion, as opposed to the domesticated approach of right arm, left leg, and left arm, right leg. The stance at the beginning of this walk is similar to a karate *zenkutsu-dachi* or front stance, while the swinging action that accompanies the walk could be compared to a *Shotokai* karate punching action (Nihon Karate Do Shoto-kai, n.d., “Stances”).

Instructions:

- 1) Begin walking in a straight line.
- 2) Intermittently stop and check your arm and leg positions.
- 3) After a few minutes, stop and assume a low stance with your left leg forward and right leg back (similar to a karate front stance).
- 4) Make sure your hips are square and facing front.
- 5) Lower your centre of gravity.
- 6) Swing your right arm and leg forward in an exaggerated manner while maintaining a level height.
- 7) Repeat with the left arm and leg.
- 8) Continue moving in this manner for several minutes.
- 9) Gradually reduce the swinging action and raise your stance until you are walking in a more upright position.
- 10) Continue walking in this manner until it begins to feel natural.
- 11) Return to your domesticated walking manner but maintain an awareness of this new de-domesticated method of walking.

## Energy

The concept of *ki* as an intrinsic energy that can be manipulated, is present throughout many martial arts. Westbrook and Ratti (1974) describe *ki* as “Mental Energy” (p. 17). Zarrilli (2000) contends that an “individual who actualizes an intuitive awareness of *ki*-energy and is able to channel this energy throughout the body is able to control and extend it out from the body” (p. 39). Elvis Presley was a dedicated martial artist who possessed tremendous presence as both a singer and actor. Presley’s karate teacher, Ed Parker (2012) attributed Presley’s charisma to his use of *ki* in his performances:

Elvis applied Ki or Chi when he was on stage. His Karate training taught him to master body movements and synchronize them with his thoughts [...] When



the subconscious mind is utilized and synchronized with breath and strength, power is maximized. As a result of his sophisticated knowledge, human magnetism radiated from Elvis' moves (n.p.).

Frost and Yarrow (1990) posit that a prerequisite for having a powerful presence is the addition of a controlled energy that can be manipulated to fit the dimensions of the space in which an actor performs (p. 101). In *ankoku butoh*, practitioners utilise "the central force of energy lying low in the body" (Sweeney, 2009, p. 60), which is subsequently distributed and projected outward as an energetic presence. The alternate projection and reception of energy encourages a greater awareness of a martial artist's ability to manipulate energy, a crucial component in the development of the 'having presence' state. A focussed energy, combined with a heightened state of awareness further facilitates a state of flow in which "there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future" (Turner, 1979, p. 487). It is vital for a martial artist to be energetically grounded while stationary, and to embody energy when moving.

### Exercise 3: Energy Turn

Energy Turn is an original exercise concerned with the conscious projection and receiving of energy. In this exercise, the 'receiving' person's physical response to the 'projecting' person's perceived energy, operates as confirmation of the effectiveness (or not) of the 'projecting' person's ability to project energy. Subsequently, the projecting person is motivated to activate the correct response from the receiver. Projecting energy 'through' a person or object is designed to enhance a greater understanding and awareness of how energy can be manipulated and projected at varying distances. The projection of energy requires a controlled focus while a high level of psychological and physical discipline is necessary to maintain this energy level for an extended duration. In Energy Turn, a practitioner is required to increase and decrease energy levels before returning to a constant present state while continuing to resonate with energy. The alternate projection and reception of energy encourages a greater awareness of a martial artist's ability to manipulate energy, a crucial component in the development of the 'having presence' state.

#### Instructions:

- 1) One person is the *projector* of energy and the other is the *receiver* of energy.
- 2) Stand three metres apart from each other, with the *receiver* facing a wall, and the *projector* facing the back of the receiver.
- 3) The *projector* consciously projects their energy onto the *receiver's* back.
- 4) If the *receiver* becomes aware of the *projector's* energy they turn to face them.
- 5) Change places.
- 6) Repeat the exercise at a distance of five metres.

It is important for the receiver not to feel any pressure to turn and for the projector not to make any physical movements or noise. Further, the projector should focus on projecting energy, not emotion or imagery, onto the receiver.

## **Conclusion**

The suggested exercises presented in this article, aimed at developing the dual states of ‘being present’ and ‘having presence’, are designed to not only contribute to theoretical research into the use of actor training techniques for martial artists, but may also offer a practical benefit to martial arts practitioners, in general. The value of ‘being present’ in a self-defense environment is evident to a martial artist, requiring a multiple focus and a responsive body, able to be react instantly in a ‘moment to moment’ fluid situation. Furthermore, the ability to project a powerful presence is equally crucial for self-defense purposes. Thus, the development of a *martial presence* should be considered an essential component of a martial artist’s training regimen.

## **Disclaimer**

The author is not responsible in any manner for any injury which may occur by reading and/or following the exercise instructions contained within this article. It is essential that before following any of the exercises, the reader should first consult a physician for advice on whether or not they should undertake such physical activities.

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