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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uqst20>

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To cite this article: Gunn Helene Engelsrud (2023): A Phenomenological Exploration of Relaxation as a Movement Skill, *Quest*, DOI: [10.1080/00336297.2023.2180397](https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2023.2180397)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2023.2180397>



Published online: 23 Mar 2023.



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A Phenomenological Exploration of Relaxation as a Movement Skill

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a phenomenological approach to explore the phenomenon of relaxation as a movement skill. The phenomenological perspective takes inspiration primarily from selected works of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Samuel Todes, and Kym Maclaren. The author explores the phenomenon of relaxation as a movement skill by analysing three situations: 1) the new-born embracing and being embraced in interpersonal relaxation, 2) the “relaxed attack” approach of elite athletes, and 3) the yogi’s experience of finding relaxation in shavasana (dead man’s pose). The analyses draw on the phenomenological framework of Husserl’s concepts of “passivity”, Maclaren’s idea of “letting oneself be” and Todes’ conceptualisation of a spatiotemporal field further illustrates how the body’s unity with the world. The conclusion suggests that relaxation is an ambiguous movement skill, simultaneously an intrinsic part of being alive as a human being, a precondition for all movement capability and an achievement in its own right.

KEYWORDS

Relaxation; movement skills; phenomenology; letting be; sensory intake

Introduction

My basic starting point for this article is that I consider movement skills to be an intrinsic part of being alive as a human being. It would be as difficult to define movement skills separately from lived experience as it would be to take the yellow color out of a lemon or the color out of a blanket (Todes, 2001). To go even further, taking relaxation out of movement skills or movement skills out of relaxation would immediately have connotations associated with death or life-threatening situations. These kinds of life-threatening situations are an important topic that should be further addressed in movement learning but would require an article of their own. However, to explore the phenomenon of relaxation as a movement skill, I will define the understanding of relaxation movement skills that I aim to explore in the article.

Perhaps it is best to begin by stating what I *don't* mean when I say relaxation. I am not talking about relaxation in the sense of crashing on a sofa in front of the television to “veg out with out”. I am also not talking about relaxation as something modern people should practice to feel better. Anyone who is seeking to learn how to relax need only refer to the explosion of recipes, retreats, courses, and lifestyle makeovers that advertise mindfulness and wellness in the media and beyond. I do not discuss theories that explain how the “mind affects the body,” or that treat (muscular) tension as a hindrance to relaxation, as indicated on bumper stickers and coffee cups

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with slogans such as, “Don’t tell me to relax, my tension is the only thing keeping me together!”¹. While steering clear of the above mentioned pop-culture appropriations of relaxation as a lifestyle goal, I have delved into much of the abundant research on the health benefits of relaxation (e.g., Ohno, 2005; Singh & Singh, 2010).

However, my approach in this article is to explore relaxation from a phenomenological perspective; to illuminate one apparently obvious, but remarkably unexplored aspect of movement skill acquisition and movement capabilities. I show the ambiguous nature of relaxation as a movement skill, which both is an intrinsic part of being alive as a human being, a precondition for all movement capability and an achievement in its own right. I have relied particularly on the work of the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Lanei Rodemeyer’s reading of Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Kym Maclaren’s reading of Merleau-Ponty and Samuel Todes. I will unpack relaxation as a movement skill using three situations: 1) a newborn embracing and being embraced, creating interpersonal relaxation, 2) the “relaxed attack” approach of elite athletes, and 3) the yogi’s experience of finding relaxation in *shavasana* (dead man’s pose). I attempt to use these situations as stepping stones, allowing descriptions of the situations to guide me toward an understanding of the phenomenon of relaxation. These situations are chosen to represent different manifestations of relaxation as a movement skill. They are not intended to be interpreted as empirical facts or as the experiences of unique, existing individuals (Behnke, 1997; Zaner, 1978), but rather as actual and possible examples of “the same kind of phenomenon” (Behnke, 1997, p. 185). In line with Behnke my interest “is eidetic, not empirical, and the specific examples chosen are merely meant as clues toward structures that could equally well be illustrated by different examples” (p. 185). The structure of this article is an invitation to theorize the intrinsic, dialectical, and ambiguous ways that relaxation functions as a movement skill, exploring its appearance, variations, contextualization, and relevance for movement skill acquisition.

First, I mention a selection of the current research on movement skill acquisition. Then I give an overview of the phenomenological foundation for the article, including the methodological approach, and how I chose the situations used in the article. I continue with bringing the three situations and the phenomenological concepts together, which allow me to re-tell the situations and elucidate how they are relevant for understanding relaxation (Englander & Morley, 2023). In the final section, I sum up the variations and similarities that allow me to characterise relaxation as a movement skill. In the conclusion I demonstrate how a recognition of personal and (anonymous) receptivity and the practice of indulging in relaxation are parts of acquiring movement skills that human beings need and use throughout their lives.

Searching for literature on relaxation as a movement skill

I searched for literature by using the query “movements skill AND relaxation AND phenomenology” in databases such as Education Research Complete, ERIC, Sport Discus and Oria, but my search produced no results. Nevertheless, there is of course a huge amount of literature on the phenomenology of bodily experience and movement practices (e.g Engelsrud and Rosberg, 2021; Dahlberg, 2011, 2022; Moreau, 2014; Parviainen & Aromaa, 2017; Ø. Standal & Engelsrud, 2013). Using a phenomenological perspective on movement skill acquisition assumes the values the relation between sensory receptivity, passive synthesis, and active movements responses. These various phenomena are perceived to be a looping, intertwined foundation for the body’s ability to move in a variety of ways. Variety in movement – including through relaxation – and movement

capability thus depend on the flow of breath and relaxation (Bainbridge Cohen, 1993; Bartenieff & Lewis, 1980).

In addition, there is a broad literature on movement skill acquisition in research on physical education (PE). Researchers within this field agree on acknowledging subjectivity and overcoming meaningful challenges are central elements in acquiring new movement skills (Aggerholm et al., 2018; Aggerholm & Larsen, 2017; Barker et al., 2017, 2020, 2022; Nyberg, 2014; Nyberg et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2021; Larson, 2021; Ø. Standal & Aggerholm, 2016). The mentioned researchers acknowledge that there is no linear prescription to follow to acquire a movement skill; hence practitioners must dedicate themselves to spending time practicing as well as attending to critical aspects of their practicing and remaining flexible. Learners must make sense of their own subjective movement learning (Barker et al., 2022; Rönnqvist et al., 2019). The literature on movement acquisition and capability that I have mentioned above includes research on the practice of unicycling, skateboarding, snowboarding, juggling, parkour, and dancing. Practice and exercise are essential elements in the achievement of movement capabilities.

Researchers as Aggerholm and Larsen (2017) conduct their research on the bodily experience of parkour practitioners using an existential phenomenological analysis based on the phenomenology of embodiment. Also, Standal in collaboration with Standal and Aggerholm (2016) build on phenomenological literature in order to examine how skill acquisition as practical knowledge involves Merleau-Ponty's (1962/2005) notion of habit.² They show how phenomenology is a suitable starting point for understanding the relationship between skill acquisition and embodied experiences.

Many researchers have also suggested that bodily awareness is an important part of acquiring movement skills. In order to develop bodily awareness the practitioner must find their own way of moving and develop embodied self-knowledge (e.g. Bergentoft, 2020; Nyberg, 2014; Ø. F. Standal & Bratten, 2021, p. 1).

To summarize, there are researchers who examine movement skills within phenomenology. For example, Standal and Aggerholm (2016) who are rooted in phenomenology and concerned with experiencing movement through practice, but do not specifically address relaxation as an essential element of practice. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are not interested in relaxation as a relevant part of movement practices. I assume that researchers or practitioners of movement skill agree on that no jump can be practiced without bending one's knees and yielding to the ground prior to jumping. Nevertheless, as indicated in the limited literature that I have identified, capabilities in movement are researched with emphasis on active and continuous exercise and skills performed in space, with or without the use of equipment such as skateboards, juggling balls, etc. Since none of the cited authors explicitly describe the phenomenon of relaxation as connected to acquiring and experiencing a movement skill, my article might add to the existing literature on movement skill acquisition.

These lack of research perspectives on relaxation as part of the acquisition of movement skills, bring me to the phenomenological foundation for this article.

With phenomenology as lenses for exploring relaxation

When taking a phenomenological perspective on the exploration of relaxation as a movement skill, I have relied particularly on some specific philosophers and concepts.

I start with Husserl's concepts of passive synthesis and hyletic flow, which illuminated my understanding of how relaxation occurs through bodily awareness, without demanding conscious willpower or a forced focus. I continue with explaining Maclaren's idea of "letting oneself be," receptivity and passive synthesis. Then follows Todes' conceptualization of a spatiotemporal field, which further illustrates how the body's unity with the world and its upright and forward-directed structure always connect with the world to create possibilities for the experience of relaxation.

Husserl's concepts of passive synthesis and hyletic flow

Rodemeyer's (2020) analysis of Husserl posits that the constitution of embodiment is present in relation to the following five dimensions: the life of generation preceding her own, interpersonal communities, active constitutions (for example, the constitution of movement), passive synthesis and hyletic flow. However, in Husserl's lifetime, establishing a philosophy that diverged from the positivistic sciences was considered radical. His thinking revolutionized the philosophy of knowledge, when he suggested that what we know about a phenomenon (e.g., movement skill acquisition) cannot be separated from how a subject (e.g., movement practitioner) constitutes the phenomenon through experience. He argued that all knowledge, ultimately originates from and is entirely based upon subjective perception and experience and that is the main reason why knowledge can include both passivity and bodily impressions that are vague and fluctuating. This ambiguity is one of many reasons that movement and bodily experiences are complicated to understand. Rodemeyer's (2020) has further developed insight into how Husserl, over the course of his life and work, provided us with a framework of the constitution of embodiment; ranging from the active constitution of movements derived from intersubjective community and meaning developed within a culture to rudimentary sensory experiences or the primordial flow that underlies active perception. Regarding Husserl's concept of experience, Rodemeyer's (2020, p. 324) wrote:

Husserl scholars, and those who work with Husserl's phenomenology, are generally familiar with the fact that there are different levels of the constitution of our experiences, such as the level of passive synthesis (PS) as opposed to the intersubjective levels.

Husserl's notion of "passive" does not mean static or inactive, but rather that which is "passive" indicates the synthetic work done by consciousness that *goes unnoticed* while consciousness is engaged in direct (i.e., active) experiences, which he elaborated on in his paper on passive and active synthesis (Husserl, 2001). Thus, analyses of Husserl's levels of experience often point to the interweaving of structure and content in consciousness and in our experiences. Past experiences can enter present consciousness through the process of remembering. In the streaming consciousness we also find habits that affect the acquisition of movement skills and experiences, derived from a person's history and interpersonal relations. It means that meanings developed within culture entangle with- and manifest in the subject's movements. The history becomes present in their engagement with the world and others. Husserl's levels of constitution of embodiment and experience refer to concepts he called "passive synthesis" (PS) and "hyletic flow" (HF), concepts that I use to illuminate relaxation in the situation with the newborn. Passive synthesis addresses associations and memories that is in play in experiences. Hyletic flow is an even more rudimentary layer of

sensory experience underlying our acts of perception and is conceptualized as a stream of primordial sensory impressions, which we can understand as a core experience in the ability to move with intention. Rodemeyer's text clearly shows how Husserl's levels of constitution of experience can aid the researcher who is approaching experience as a phenomenon. I activate the "passive" levels of experience in the analysis of the three situations. As mentioned, ambiguity is another cornerstone concept in phenomenology, which is elucidated in the next section.

Maclaren's idea of "letting oneself be"

One of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's central ideas was the ambiguity of the body; he believed that it is both actively sentient and passively sensible (Maclaren, 2014, p. 97). These two attributes are inherently inseparable, which means that the phenomenological subject is not isolated and separate from the world and others but lives her subjectivity within the intersubjective. She is intentionally directed both toward the world and away from the world. This ambiguity is also present in the context of phenomena such as being touched and touching, seeing, and being seen, or sensing and being sensed. I would argue that being relaxed and relaxing is an equivalent phenomenon; I will come back to this idea in the discussion section. Maclaren (2002) introduced the phenomenon of "letting be," which means feeling oneself as present and being "here," and feeling the "me-ness" of being here. In the context of the exploration of relaxation as a movement skill, this means letting the weight, volume, structure, senses, thoughts, and feelings of the body simply be as they are from moment to moment and experiencing "releasing our body weight" toward the ground, registering how this affects our openness and presence in dialogue with others (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2021).

We can better understand what "letting be" is by referring to an example given by Merleau-Ponty that shows the ambiguity that is central to skill acquisition. In his analysis of two hands touching, he wrote that when the right hand as a subject touches the left hand, each hand feels the other from a slightly different position. However, at the same time, both hands belong to the same unity. This unity is not without differentiation, which allows the hands to be intertwined. Intersubjectivity and subjectivity are part of unity, and the concepts presuppose one another. This combination of unity and differentiation leads us to Todes' conceptualization of a spatiotemporal field.

Todes' conceptualization of a spatiotemporal field

Todes made a strong contribution to phenomenology with his 1963 dissertation entitled *The Human Body as the Material Subject of the World*. In this dissertation he highlights the fact that the sensing body senses direction, and our own body-directedness enables us to distinguish different movement qualities, initiatives, and the body's needs. Todes (2001, p. 70) argued that "we necessarily know to some extent what we are doing because we are necessarily to some extent really doing it, and thereby making our world habit-able, if we have a world of experience at all" Here he took the unity of the experiencing subject and the experienced world one step further than Merleau-Ponty; for Todes, human experience is our quest to meet our needs and "our needs must be to some extent satisfied if there is to be any experience at all" (p. 51). Using Todes' reasoning, we can understand movement skills

not merely by noticing, but by producing the spatiotemporal field or circumstantial field; the field in which things appear to the subject. Todes regarded movement as fundamentally self-produced and directed toward the fulfillment of a person's needs. He fleshes out the idea that feelings in all forms of tactility, proprioceptively motility and emotionality are "the thickly substantive character" (p. 266) of the subject body. Further, he described the thickly substantial body appearing as a voluminous unity, which is felt as the interiority of our substantial sentient body (p. 266).³ The voluminous body is "a central core without a center" (p. 226) and with this expression Todes pointed to the body's "all-in form," that every part of the body implicates all the others. His notion of the substantial sentient body includes structures in a front/back asymmetry, with volume and balance in a gravitational field. The gravitational field is a zero point and a cornerstone in being present here and now. In the here and now, the body in its very existence is a knowing body, and using its sense, it knows the objects and bodies around it. This form of knowing Todes called being in poise, which is different from the will or other rational intentions.

With this conceptual framework as background, I continue with the selection of the situations of relaxation that I draw on in the article.

The methods for choosing actual and possible examples on relaxation

As already stated, I have chosen three situations which invite to discover and theorize phenomenon of relaxation. To select these situations, I took my methodological inspiration from the original meaning of the word *method*, which is derived from the Greek *methodos*, is "taking a road." "Taking a road" means doing something on that road, but it also implies going where the road takes you. In the phenomenological methodological approach that I have chosen, the researcher should be attentive and sensitive toward the selection of phenomenon as well as the phenomena itself (Bengtsson, 2001, 2005; Depraz et al., 2003). It involves exploring variations in the phenomenon and being aware of the ambiguity that characterizes phenomenological experiences. Phenomena are always selected and subjective yet belonging to a shared (research) world and community. In the book "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty (2000, p. 15) provided examples of the phenomenological gaze in the work of Cezanne, who "loaned his body to the world" (a mountain, nature) and thereby transformed the world into artwork. The painting is therefore neither a copy nor an image of the mountain, but neither is it a "free fantasy" inspired by the mountain. A phenomenological approach does not imply reducing the phenomenon to a measurable "thing," but being open to the eidetic variations of the phenomenon (Bengtsson, 2005; Englander & Morley, 2023). Taking experience from three (life) situations; the newborn entering the common world, an athlete's experience of being in attentive relaxation and the yogis practice of shavasana. I chose situations that function as actual and possible examples of the same kind of phenomenon. Taken together the situation create possibilities to analyze eidetic variation. I am able to work with suspended attention in order to rediscover what Merleau-Ponty told (Bengtsson, 2005, p. viii) us that "we shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology." He warned us against giving priority to explanations and analysis without taking one's own particular point of view into consideration. I have followed this "road" and worked for a long time to select situations, that from my point of view, are suitable to elucidate both the complexity and the clarity of a phenomenon of relaxation. A qualitative researcher should, according to Englander and

Morley (2023) avoid intrusive and overly imposing theoretical explanations, abstractions or even speculations about the situation chosen as research material. Instead, they advise researchers to remain within the tension of two intertwined positions: both having confidence in the phenomenon and suspend the analytical lenses and convert examples into knowledge. I use this phenomenological methodological guidance, seeking to (re)discover my own blind spots by constantly changing positions and gaining new vantage points.

My methodological approach is a modification of that of Englander and Morley (2023), since I have selected the situations, but by using three different situations in which participants practice-or indulge into relaxation, expressed as somesthetic, or proprioceptive sensations. Maclaren (2002, p. 191) argued for the importance of this approach when she wrote that going to her friend's farm to be with horses in real life taught her more than any written piece could do. I do not want to make it seem as though writing and experience are incompatible, after all, writing is my chosen medium for discussing relaxation as a movement skill in this article. My intention is merely to create awareness of the mediation involved in writing about lived experience, without objectifying and reducing the lived phenomenon of relaxation, too much.

The newborn embracing and being embraced

Newborn babies and their way of relating to the people around them can display the role of *presence* in relaxation. When writing earlier drafts of this article, I struggled to find the language that could do the newborn's experience justice. Kym Maclaren's reflections on living and writing inspired me to begin again. For inspiration, I turned to Karl Ove Knausgård's novel *In Spring* (2016) which had touched me with its poetic language about contact with a newborn the first time I read it. In the novel, Knausgård writes these opening lines to his three-month-old daughter:

You don't know what air is, yet you breathe. You don't know what sleep is, yet you sleep. You don't know what night is, yet you're in it. You don't know what heart is, yet it beats evenly in your chest, day and night, day and night, day and night. (p. 1 my translation from Norwegian)

Knausgård continuously describes his daughter's environment and circumstances and how her being-in-the-world creates the spatiotemporal field full of changing tables, diapers, wet wipes, toy wagons, duvets, pillows, and above all the parents' large, warm bodies. The author is emotionally overwhelmed and experiences a strong existential sense of being "here and now." He reflects on living an adult life with all its duties and responsibilities and contrasts it with the newborn's presence and flow of being without worries. The new-born finds her way into an environment in which she is touched by and touches more solid material than she experienced in the fluid environment, where being within the mother's womb is an important part of learning and being (Bainbridge Cohen 2018). In this moment she, even if *passive synthesis* is her base, she knows how to fulfill her needs. In the words of Maclaren (2014, p. 98) "The infant has a heart that pumps, lungs that respire, a mouth that reflexively sucks, and fingers that reflexively close around things." The body and the world embrace each other. The newborn is already a knowing subject of relaxation in a situation where its sensory flow is intertwined with the world and others through its breath and its touch. In Husserl's levels of constitution of embodiment, "passive embodiment" describes the synthetic work done

by consciousness that *goes unnoticed* while consciousness is engaged in direct (i.e., active) experience.⁴

Indulging the sensation of relaxation, feeling rhythmic contact, and being passively carried is what Knausgård remind us of as a pleasurable, absorbing, immersive and relaxed experience for a newborn. The experience of being in contact with a newborn baby who is sleeping, breastfeeding, or lying in one's arms makes it clear how all-consuming peace and rest can be. The newborn is unconcerned with making judgments about the world or attempting to manipulate it. Husserl's levels of passive synthesis and hyletic flow illuminate how relaxation occurs in bodily awareness, without demanding conscious willpower or focus on force. For those in the room, an infant's presence can be felt throughout the body and in the breath, stimulating a feeling of deep relaxation. If we consider the newborn's way of being present, breathing and taking in the world through the body and skin, without any specific effort, while still being in her own body-directedness, we can observe a level of movement skill on which all later practice of movement will depend. Movement in space starts from the ground where we have discovered that the newborn and her world are part of a field of existence in which social contact is established.

The zero point for movement exploration

The social embodied situation is a zero point for a phenomenological exploration of relaxation as a movement skill. The infant clearly shows that relaxation is not the result of willful effort, but of an embodied subject's successful knowing that arises in relation to the world around it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2005, pp. 65–66). The newborn is a knowing body in its very existence, and relaxation will already be inherent in her when she later develops and executes more actively performed skills such as crawling. In order to accomplish this, she will have to use her body weight and the floor, reach out and use forward orientation in her movements. Yet even at this early stage, she propels herself forward to explore and grasp objects like her mother's breast and the skin of her caregivers. To continue her active movement development, she is also dependent on yielding and relaxing into the ground. She explores her movement capability by spending time on the floor. The floor is the spatiotemporal field where adults with movement problems must start, being on the floor (standing up or lying down), in order to reset their basic movements, and to feel secure and relaxed. The newborn gives her relaxed body to others and the world and offers contact with the basic rhythm of breath, filling and emptying, embodied waves coming and going through her.

Relaxation is inherent in bodily life

As already mentioned, from being embraced in a fluid environment before birth, the newborn finds her way into an environment in which she is touched by and touches more solid material than she experienced in the fluid environment. As Knausgård wrote, she is embracing the world and being embraced by the warmth of adult bodies that surround her. She breathes her own body; she finds her sleep and relaxation in contact with another body. In sleep, her body, and the other feel like a single unit again, just as they did when she was in the fluid environment. The newborn does not delineate her own bodily borders, she experiences the breast as an extension of her own body and lives in an intersubjective world, where active and passive meaning-making are intertwined.

Relaxation is inherent in the body from the earliest stages of life. For adults to relearn to relax later in life, they must (re)engage their “direct and primitive contact with the world and endowing that contact with a philosophical status” as (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2005, p. vii) reminded us in his preface to *Phenomenology and Perception*. He is suggesting that we are all capable of (re)discovering our original embodied encounters with the world, and it is precisely this return that can provide the key to achieving relaxation as a movement skill.

Hanne Haugland, 1997 high jump world champion

Hanne Haugland is a Norwegian elite athlete who became a world champion in Athens in 1997. The story I will tell about her is based on a Norwegian summer radio program⁵ where different well-known people are invited to talk about their life experiences. As a world-class athlete, Haugland spoke about, among other things, the way in which relaxation was at the very foundation of her achievement in sports competition and performance. She competed nationally and internationally from 1983 to 2000, performing at the high jump world championship in 1997. She was a coach of national athletes in high jump from 2006–2012, and works today in coaching for athletics, sailing, golf, and table tennis. I have written down some excerpts from her account of her movement experience and the role of relaxation therein:

The experience of being a world champion lives in the body. There was a night when everything clicked, and my body flew over the bar, and I felt the air between my body and the bar, and I knew exactly what I was doing. I knew in my first few attempts I had started the approach too fast, so I had to slow down and lost the speed that I needed to convert into my jump. I started off calmly and felt hungry for the win, fully charged and in attack mode, ready to find the right movement and rhythm that would carry me through the jump. It all starts with concentration and being completely present in the here-and-now. It had taken me a long time to understand my own method, and to understand that unity in one continuous movement, and allow myself to be in my world. I remember another competition when I had the same feeling. We were two athletes left in the competition. Then suddenly, before my last jump, I started to think, what if I win? and suddenly saw myself with a gold medal. I lost everything and ended with a silver medal. It took me several years to come back to that feeling, but for me the overall competence that I have achieved over the year is to be relaxed, smile and be in a good mood.

I found parallels between what Haugland was talking about and Todes (2001, p. 62). Todes wrote: “We *know* what is happening because we are aware of ourselves as making it happen, as responsible for it happening because what we are doing is *self-evident*.” The primary form of directed action is an intention of the body, a body-directedness where the bodily intention imbues the mover’s actions with a sense of space and time, which presupposes all higher forms of action as will and judgment. Sometimes, however, we do not know what we are doing, and these are the times when our movements feel uncoordinated, clumsy, and disorientated. As mentioned earlier, bodily responses to activities and objects in the world are our primary form of knowledge, right from birth. The concept of *poise* relates to a way of dealing with objects in the world that, when it is successful, has its own effect. Todes (p. 66) wrote that *poise* is different from the use of will or arguments:

In the case of *poise*, unlike that of will and some other intention of the mind, its goal of knowing what it is doing is achieved *immediately* with the initiation of the activity concerned. As soon as I am poised in my circumstances, I know what I, with my body, am doing, but also *what* I am doing, e.g., something about those objects to which I am doing something with my body.

Haugland described being poised, knowing in her body what she was doing, and knowing how she needed to interact with the surrounding environment that was inherent to her performance of the high jump. Todes argued that (p. 66) “to be poised is to be *self*-possessed by being in touch with one’s *circumstances*. To lose touch is immediately to lose one’s poise.” Athletes’ success is closely connected to being poised and at one with their movement; there is no separation between “making up their mind” to do something and being *poised* to complete the action. The opposite of poise is separating oneself from the object and thinking of achievements as the “effect” of decisions or intentions. The necessity of being poised to complete an action is further illuminated by the work undertaken by Haugland to find “her own way.” Her movement experiences were a quest to meet her needs. Her approach to movement learning and success in high jump included negotiations to find balance, harmony, and rhythm between relaxation and a competitive intention.

When too much force freezes the movement

From bodily sensing and feeling Haugland knew that to use too much force would freeze her up. The jump depended on how she adjusted her upright position to the circumstances, and she continually felt and relied upon weight changes and postural fluctuations. According to Todes, a voluminous body both takes up space and creates a spatiotemporal field that moves with the mover and vice-versa. This self-moved, clearly non-static mover, depends on letting itself be taken over by movement, taking its weight and volume further into the spatiotemporal field, fulfilling its needs as it becomes aware of them.

Haugland’s example shows just how rare it is for even professional athletes to perform at their very best. It took her six years to get back the feeling of poised movement after she lost touch with it during a competition. When she was poised, she experienced a totality of being absorbed in her action; she was relaxed and, in a position to attack as a unified being, with no separation between thought and movement, no part of herself that was disconnected. Her movement skills were perfectly adjusted to the jump that she knew in every minute detail, but knowing the details was only relevant to her insofar as they gave her body freedom to move in the way it knew how (Todes, 2001, p. 188) and offered her perfect balance in a state of relaxed focus. Haugland struggled for years to regain her feeling of relaxation as a supportive and grounding force, interwoven with movement skill, and dependent on continuous practice. Her experience showed that she had a hard time (re) discovering the feeling of being one with her circumstances.

The relaxed attack

Her experience sheds light on how an athlete can lose poise by seeing themselves from the outside: Haugland saw herself with the gold medal before the competition was finished, and the result was that she lost her presence and own bodily awareness. Haugland knew that a poised combination of focus and relaxation was necessary for her to be successful. In her three first attempts in Athens, she started her approach with too much speed and had to slow down, and thus was not able to reach the optimal speed for her jump. She adjusted her movement using an interwoven combination of sensory perception and motor intentionality. There could be no compromise, the totality of her bodily structure had to be aligned with itself to successfully fly over the bar. Her success and her subjectivity were not separate from each other, nor was one the effect of the other. They were a single, intertwined circumstance in which she was at one with the bar, the stadium, the audience, and the rest of her surroundings. Without forcing anything,

Haugland, relaxed her body, let her feet carry her attacking body and got all the energy created between the body and the ground to fly over the bar as a whole, voluminous unit with awareness of all its axes: forward/backward, up/down, left/right. As a skillful mover, she moved in relation to her balance, the ground, and the space around her.

The yogi's experience of finding relaxation – the shavasana posture in yoga practice

The third example I discuss is that of a yoga practitioner, or yogi, finding relaxation in a pose considered by many teachers and practitioners to be the most important and the most difficult in the practice of yoga. The position is called *shavasana*, a Sanskrit name derived from two words: *sava* meaning “corpse” and *asana* meaning “posture.” Traditionally, the *corpse* pose is an asana performed at the end of a yoga practice, in which practitioners lie flat on their backs with their heels spread as wide as the yoga mat and their arms a few inches away from their body, palms facing upwards. *shavasana* is considered a “mental relaxation.” The yogi gives her body into the ground, relaxes her breath and “does nothing.” The practice of relaxation is a wholly self-initiated movement that arises from unity of the body and the spatiotemporal field. When engaging in *shavasana*, the idea is that intentionality is directed toward preparing the body for death. This is a text that I, as a yoga practitioner, wrote after a yoga class:

I am lying on my back, flat on the floor. The room is warm, and I feel the bright light even though my eyes are closed. The teacher tells us that this is our reward after the challenging practice and all we have to do is relax and let our bodies sink into the floor. The floor is trusting and safe. I feel my body tensing up in the shoulders- why? I feel the floor touching my body and my body touching the floor. In the beginning the two are different, then they merge, and I am one with the floor and the space, no borders but indulging in deep relaxation. The outbreath and inbreath, just follow and be at one with my breath. Suddenly I hear the teacher's voice, it seems to come from far away. “Take a deep breath in, a deep breath out, slowly in your own time, come back to your awareness of your body. When you are ready, take a deep stretch and roll over to your right side. Take your time to come up to a seated position.”

The experience of relaxation in *shavasana* felt like being carried away from the actual space. The teacher's voice combined with listening to what was happening in my own body, the movement experience and the passive receptivity contrasted strongly with the movement experiences that preceded *shavasana* in the yoga practice. Being in *shavasana* creates opportunities to drop into the subtle layers of being, the invisible levels, where accordingly passive synthesis and hyletic flow occur. In *shavasana*, the lived, experienced body transcends itself, like the paintings of Cézanne that lend themselves to the world in Merleau-Ponty's example. In *shavasana* the yoga practitioners lend their body to the ground. The objective of the pose is, a way of transforming and find poise in one's circumstances. In contrast to Haugland, who used her oneness with her surroundings to actively jump over the bar, the yogi's practice is to do nothing. The yogi gives herself over to the (spiritual) world and transforms her world, like the painter transforms the world with his/her painting. During the transformative phase, the yogi's attention descends to subconscious, unconscious levels which open the way for Husserl's passive synthesis as a particularly important dimension of experience. *Shavasana* brings the yogi into subtle modes or regions of experience and cultivates a sensibility appropriate to the phenomenon of relaxation. In *shavasana*, the voluminous body often no longer feels its borders with space but is instead

one with the circumstances. Nothing is actively moving and the silence of deep relaxation floods into the body. When the teacher in the situation called the yogis to “bring awareness back to the body,” he built on his knowledge of the phenomenon of long-time practice within the tradition and teaches from an experience that echoes the “understanding in [his] bones” (Hyams, 1979, p. 92).

The primordial and non-conceptual understanding

The primordial and non-conceptual understanding that yogis’ experience in *shavasana* is clear to them when they compare the different movement experiences during practice. This reflection is intertwined in the relationship between being and having a body, as shown in Merleau-Ponty’s example of the two hands touching. Merleau-Ponty gives credit to the primordial and silent language of the body. “Les voix du silence” refers to those who do not speak about the world, but instead let the world come to light and discover the experiences that hide behind discursive language (e.g., Tin, 2000, p. 118). I compare the way the painter transforms his surroundings in his painting with how *shavasana* is an art of relaxation that subtly shifts the parameters of the yogi’s world when they release their body into the ground. However, doing nothing, receiving the ground, and giving up visible movement activity can be challenging. Finding relaxation in *shavasana* is also an achievement, a way of being in the “here-ness” that Husserl called the ground zero of orientation (Behnke, 2015, p. 70). At the same time, entering *shavasana* means going “there,” to a place where the perceptual field is simultaneously limited by closed eyes and expanded by an open imagination and a floating feeling where the body and the world are in union.

Being in union with the world and being oneself

Since feeling relaxation in *shavasana* is difficult for many people, it requires practice and patience. This relationship between the sentient and sensible body and our being sentient and being sensible is essentially intertwined (Maclaren, 2014, p. 99). These essentially intertwined relations are one of the cornerstones that Merleau-Ponty developed in *The Visible and Invisible*, and that are further developed in Todes’ theory. The relaxation achieved in *shavasana* is not an end, however. It is intended to make new, fresh, and ethical movement available to the yogi, by helping them to learn, as Todes puts it, what they are doing while they are doing it. In this situation it is essential to develop one’s body and movement through passivity, by being in relaxation and in touch with the floor. Receptivity is a precondition for active movement. In *shavasana*, “letting be” refers to letting the weight, volume, structure, senses, thoughts, and feelings of the body just be as they are from moment to moment and doing nothing. “letting be” in this situation means feeling oneself as present and being “here,” and feeling the me-ness of being here and letting that fade away. By being both “here” in her own body and being taken over by a creative leap and imagining themselves “there,” she is able to enter a world of hyletic flow, and connect to the relaxing capacity that is “already at work in us” (Maclaren, 2014, p. 57). Giving in to the body’s weight, (Dahlberg, 2011), breath, and self-organized rhythm is reminiscent of the relaxation the newborn shares with her parents when they hold her in their arms.

In line with a shared, felt relaxation, the idea of “letting be” is an invitation to let one’s own body take in the social situation and find its way to a position of poise. “Letting be” means letting oneself and the other experience peace and allowing movement to be playful and free, instead of being driven by the goal of achieving a specific movement goal. Perhaps

because it can seem like a passive ability, moving by “letting oneself and others be” in the present moment has not been given very much attention in research literature. Merleau-Ponty elucidated this idea of passive activity further by comparing the relationship between perception and perceiver with that of a person’s intent to sleep and the state of being asleep. When trying to sleep, he wrote,

... I am trying to breathe slowly and deeply in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at as a significance, suddenly becomes a situation. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2005, p. 246).

In all three situations described in this article, the phenomenon of relaxation reveals itself *for somebody*, although its manifestation varies in each case. Nevertheless, we have clearly seen that, in each case, the sensing and perceiving bodies share a connection to the world they inhabit, and relaxation is a phenomenon that fluctuates in an active-passive loop that is inherently indivisible. In all three situations, the body’s subjectivity does not separate the experiencing subject from objects and others; rather it connects them to their surroundings and circumstances in a spatio-temporal field. This fundamental insight brings me to the final summary of the variations and similarities that I have identified that characterize relaxation as a movement skill.

Summary – what can be learned by understanding relaxation as a movement skill?

In this article, I have demonstrated that the application of a phenomenological approach to the analysis of subjects in several different life-situations and practices can contribute to our understanding of the role of relaxation in experiencing and acquiring movement skills. Drawing attention to relaxation can give us insight into the theoretical framework that underlies the moving subject’s own practice and acquisition of movement skills.

Insights gained from Husserl and Rodemayer show that passive synthesis occurs unconsciously, existing on a primordial level but nevertheless plays an important part in integrating the more active levels of movement constitution. I have broken down some of the processes by which newborns begin with passive synthesis and eventually direct the attention further into movement discovery. Sensing, awareness, and presence are the qualities the athlete needs to meet her movement goals. Todes has shown us that relaxation represents a need that is essential in movement acquisition and life. As I have pointed to in the analysis of the three situations, relaxation points to activity and vice versa. Newborns need to be able to yield so that they can anchor onto their place in the world, the athlete must ground her movement and relax to pass the pole, and the yogi must sink into the volume and weight of her body, after having conducted her yoga practice. They are all dependent on the trusting the undersurface and the support that any movement stems from and come back to in order to continue moving.

My phenomenological exploration of relaxation as a movement skill indicates that practice and research on active movement acquisition would benefit from including questions about sensory receptivity, awareness, and the passive levels of experience. The foundation of relaxation is integrated in sensing, feeling, and the actual action in practicing movement skills. Opening oneself to relations with the world might require slowing down (Maclaren, 2002, p. 195). Similarly, it feels like “hard work” for the yogi in *shavasana* to

release her weight into the supporting floor and finding relaxation can feel like an achievement and a skill. The newborn's nonconceptual way of being reveals that relaxation comes naturally in tandem with the movement of its breath.

My approach and my analysis are an invitation to theorize the intrinsic, dialectical, and ambiguous ways that relaxation is manifested in three different life-situations and circumstances. The significance of relaxation should not be understood as a counteraction to active movement acquisition, but inherent in it. I assume that to acquire a movement skill and movement goals, are dependent on the lived body's own knowledge of being-in-the-world, which all exercise and conscious goal orientated dedication to master complicated movements, build on.

I conclude with the ambiguous presence of relaxation: from release comes achievement, movement from rest. Relaxation is in the body, both as a precondition for all movement capability and as a skill that needs to be practiced and discovered repeatedly throughout one's (movement) life. Relaxation as a movement skill is inherent in all human beings, it is, in fact, the ground zero for all our movement. The newborn's shared world, the athlete's own world, and the yoga practitioner's transcendence beyond her lifeworld indicate the dynamic and reciprocal way that subjects create and are created by their world and situations. Passive synthesis is the sister of relaxation and is a phenomenon in its own right. Through relaxation, we release tension into the ground and gain lightness in return. Relaxation is intertwined in active movement. Relaxation is as an essential source of knowledge in acquiring movement skills and underlies many of the sensing, sensible body's other capabilities. If we believe the phenomenological claim that we are embodied beings and that our experience of the world, others, and ourselves is founded in and informed by our embodiment, then there is reason to believe that relaxation plays a much more significant and foundational role in movement acquisition practices than has been previously considered.

Notes

1. I became aware of this slogan in a colleague's office and found it challenging to take it either seriously or as a joke.
2. For Merleau-Ponty habit expresses the ability to dilate one's being-in-the-world, or change one's existence, i.e. habit is not static.
3. Interiority is for Todes not the "inside" but a phenomenon of the body's organic unity (Todes, 2001, p. 266).
4. For further reading on the capacities of the newborn I recommend Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (2018).
5. Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. (2019, July 16). Hanne Haugland – Sommer og vinter i P2 – NRK Radio [Radio broadcast]. <https://radio.nrk.no/serie/sommer-i-p2/sesong/201907/MKRH03002319>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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