



FINDING FASCIA

A Dance Class with a Focus on Experiencing Fascia

Master Dance Teacher

Specialization: Professional Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

This concept and the ensuing dance classes are part of the Module 3 in the Master Dance Teacher program (MADT) of the Palucca University of Dance Dresden. This module offers the first possibility for MADT students to work with BAT students in studio dance practice.

This is the first time I will be teaching these students. I observed one Contemporary/Modern dance class with them with a faculty member via online conference platform in 2021. This observation, coupled with my pedagogical interests have led me to focus on the somatic principle of Fascia and its interventions for these three days of teaching with this class.

Throughout my training process as a somatic practitioner during the past two years, I have experienced the impact and efficacy of Somatics in dance education. Today I am concerned about how I can implement such knowledge in a dance technique class.

Questions that guide my class concept are: whether students can feel a difference in moving from the muscles and from the Fascia, and whether the work with a concentration on movement initiations can bring enhanced ease and accuracy in the performance of a movement?

I will be working with students from the second year of the Bachelor of Arts Dance program of the Palucca University in Dresden. They are between 17 and 20 years of age and have been introduced to somatic practice during the course of their first year of studies. My class will take place at the campus of the Palucca University on Friday February 4, 2022 during the regularly scheduled class in Contemporary and Modern Dance (ZT/MT).

I will start this class concept by presenting myself and briefly stating why I am personally inspired by dance and Somatics. After, I will present some particularities about the participant group with whom I will be working. Following, I will acknowledge aspects of Somatics that will appear in the course of my class, for instance *breathing patterns* and the importance of knowing about and experiencing the existence of connective tissues in the human body. After that I will introduce the Tensegrity Model, which is a prototype of a tensional network that explains how force transmission is possible to happen within an independent system and I will clarify its connection with fascial tissue. Finally, I will present the planning of my class, which comprises my aims, a detailed structure, and my chosen methodology. I will finish this concept with a short conclusion regarding my expectations about the fulfillment of this concept within the current pandemic reality as well as about the possibilities of further development of this attempt to implement Somatics into the dance technique class.

2. PERSONAL INTEREST

As a dance teacher, I have been developing a practice since 2011 that allows me to work with groups of people of different ages, dance technique levels and personal interests. I started with conventional methods of teaching contemporary dance and classical ballet, and since 2020 I have been attempting to integrate somatic tools in my pedagogical practice.

My wish to find ways to integrate the knowledge I have been acquiring with the practice in Somatics into my dance technique classes is the engine of my research in the field of pedagogy ever since I started the training program in *Somatic Movement Therapy and Pedagogy*¹ at the Susanne Kukies Institute for Somatic Learning. It is clear to me that the way somatic practices look after the human body is of great relevance to contemporary society at both microcosmic and macrocosmic dimensions; or in other words be this for personal purposes or for the dispersion in the greater community.

In my dance teaching practice I incorporate tools I have been practicing in therapeutic settings. I believe that such tools are suitable for use in the context of dance education. For example, the use of touch, exploratory movement activities, attention to internal sensations, reconnecting to our exteroceptive senses (vision, audition, touch, taste, and smell), and tuning in into our proprioceptive system, to name a few.

Beyond practical tools that can be used in a dance class situation, there are other aspects of Somatics that can be integrated into a dance class. For instance, an approach to teaching and learning processes that is not focused on the acquisition of a product coming from a second person perspective; instead, it is an approach that looks for a quality of teaching where the students become the agents of their own learning. Following this, I already attempt in my current teaching practice to create an environment where the students feel free and comfortable to make their own choices, the ones that are best suitable for them at the time being.

For this class concept I chose to focus on Fascia. I am interested in investigating differences in movement quality between muscle use and the conscious application of the experience of Fascia. The aim of my class will be to give students the opportunity to experience Fascia and apply it to the various movements that we are going to tackle all along the class.

¹ <https://somatische-koerpertherapie.jimdofree.com/ausbildung/>

3. PARTICIPANT GROUP

The group of 14 students² with whom I will be working are currently in their second year of Studies in the Bachelor of Arts Dance program at the Palucca University in Dresden.

In the group there are 9 men and 5 women. The majority of these students entered the Palucca University in the Bachelor of Arts Dance program; a relatively small number of these students received their preparatory training in the secondary school program at the Palucca University.

They have different cultural backgrounds and nationalities; Australian, Japanese, German, Italian, New Zealand, and Canadian.

The students have different levels of dance experience, especially in the field of contemporary dance. However, they are all proficient in classical dance.

As for their experience in somatic practice, 3 of them have had some instruction in the Feldenkrais Method and all of them attend Pilates classes. Besides, some of the teachers for contemporary dance, with whom they have been training since the first year of studies integrate somatic approaches to their teachings.

Another characteristic found in the group is that the men tend to be more verbally expressive than the women.

4. SOMATIC ASPECTS

4.1 Breath

Brodie and Lobel, dance artists and educators, speak in their article from 2004 about the importance of bringing attention to the breath in a dance class. As they state, it promotes relaxation and assists in controlling the effects of the sympathetic nervous system in times of stress (2004, p.80-87). The sympathetic nervous system is part of the autonomic nervous system, and as such it functions to regulate the body's unconscious actions like accelerating the heart rate, causing pupillary dilation, sweating and raising of the blood pressure.

Generally speaking, when the students enter a classroom, they bring along all the experiences they have had throughout the day, which could range from a state of over excitement to even

² Due to the current pandemic situation, attendance at classes has been reduced.

depression. As means to bring the students' attention back to the present moment, calming down overstimulation and lifting unhappy states, breathing exercises support the parasympathetic nervous system, which is also part of the autonomic nervous system and leads the body into relaxation. Breathing exercises have a direct influence in the way students can perceive their bodies and connect to class activities.

Many somatic disciplines integrate breathing exercises into their practice: The Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis, Body-Mind Centering. Colleen Wahl states in her book, "through breathing you feel the internal body growing and shrinking through the swelling of the inhalation and the contracting of the exhalation" (2019, p.35). To me, perceiving these two "simple" actions is all is needed to initiate a process of bringing awareness back to your body at the present moment. Deliberately focusing on the waves of your breath supports the re-connection with your core, like "touching" yourself from the inside. What a nice sensation it can be if you allow yourself to feel the existence of the inner room that dwells in you!

Physically, breathing occurs in 3 dimensions simultaneously and can be easily perceived in the movements of the ribcage and the abdominal cavity while you are breathing. In order to potentialize the perception of the 3-dimensional movement and as mean to connect to the breath, touch can be used in class. The exercise does not need to be performed in pairs, students can use their own hands to feel the breath moving the torso.

In the beginning of a dance class, exercises that support breathing awareness are important and very effective in guiding the mind and the body back to the present moment. It increases sensitivity and responsiveness throughout the class. They can be integrated in exploratory movement activities like free or thematic improvisation. Further in class, the connection with breathing can be reinforced, even if only verbally, as a way of encouraging students to apply the information to combinations and technical exercises. At last, breathing patterns can be the focus of the cooling-down phase of the class, in order to support the parasympathetic system to slowly bring the heart frequency down, to calm the body and re-connect to its inner space through the swelling of the inhalation and the contracting of the exhalation.

4.2 Fascia

"The word fascia originates from the Latin word *fasciae* for bundle, ribbon, bandage. It connects two things and is the in-between thing" (Kussmaul, 2017, p.1). In her article from 2017, Kussmaul writes about fascia as a metaphor and as narrator of experiences from the body

perspective. She is a dance teacher and somatic movement therapist, and she addresses fascia as a tool for dance teachers.

Physiologically, fascia³ is a network of connective tissue which is found everywhere in the human body. It's shape, size and quality depend on the location, function and how it is used. Regarding the organization of its fibers, there is a difference between those that have a higher regular demand for operation and therefore are more often used, and those that aren't, for example in the case of people with a sedentary lifestyle. Kussmaul writes that "unused fascia looks like wire wool and trained fascia organizes more symmetrically, often in a diamond shape" (2017, p.2).

Fascia has at least two important functions within the human body. It is a structure that stores and sends information back and forth throughout the whole body, and it is also a fibrous network of connective tissue that holds and transmits tensional force (Schleip 2015, as quoted in Kussmaul, 2017).

As a sensory organ, as Kussmaul states, "fascia registers tension, length, vibration, stretch, temperature, pressure, shear forces, and subtle muscular activity for the regulation of blood flow" (2017, p.4). This is possible because of a variety of sensory cells present inside the fascial web, which is in number 6 times higher than the number of neurons present in the muscles. It is also thought that, besides supporting muscles in the act of moving, in some parts of the body fascia acts as proprioceptor (Kussmaul, 2017, p.4).

For dancers, the awareness of the functionality of fascia is of great importance because of its close relationship with muscle function. Fascia does not work alone. For us to move efficiently, muscle and fascia need to work together. Biomechanically what happens is that fascia stores the kinetic energy produced in the muscles and distributes it throughout the whole muscle chains in a very efficient way.

As for how to weave fascia experiencing into a dance teaching practice, a good way is to play with imagination and intuition, and let your senses lead you on exploratory activities, for example through working with touch in pairs or through guided improvisation sessions that addresses the use of strong to light muscle tonus in agile and fluid movements. Because there is an essential difference in movement qualities when moving from the muscles and from the fascia, it can bring positive results to explore the extreme poles of these 2 movement qualities, then explore the gradation from one quality to the other. Generally speaking, to have a muscle experience can

³ See images on the appendix 1

make me feel powerful and strong while moving; on the other hand, to have a fascia experience can make my dancing more effortless, gracious and fluid.

Another way of experiencing fascia is to use the haptic perception, which mean to actively explore a surface for instance with your hands. For this exercise you can work in partners or individually, both of which bring positive results in listening inwardly and perceiving the differences in tonus between muscle tissue and fascia, and the bouncy⁴ quality of fascia.

4.3 Tensegrity

The word Tensegrity⁵ was made up by the engineer Buckminster Fuller, combining *tension* and *integrity*, and it was based on a structure of floating compression made by the artist Kenneth Snelson (Kusssmaul, 2017). The Tensegrity model is a prototype of a tensional network that explains how force transmission is possible to happen within an independent system.

A tensegrity structure is made of *islands of compression* in an *ocean of tension* (Kusssmaul, 2017). A model can be created by using sticks of wood and rubber bands or wire. In the human body, the correspondent to the tensegrity model is respectively the bones as the elements that produce compression and the muscles and fascia as the elements that assures the presence of tension.

In dance vocabulary, these forces could be translated into *pushing* and *pulling*, in which pushing is the act of creating space through compression and pulling is the counterpointing force that assures that the dancer won't entirely fall off-balance.

One type of tensegrity structure is the icosahedron⁶. Geometrically it is a regular polyhedron with 20 identical equilateral triangular sides. It is the fifth of the platonic solids and is considered to be the most significant of all the tensegrity models, particularly by researchers in bio-tensegrity of the fascia and muscles systems (Icosahedron, 2020). As it is common in all tensegrity structures, it is gravity-independent, it can be turned around and won't fall apart, it is self-contained, it is an interdependent system so a change in one part is reflected throughout, and it is responsive to impact (Kusssmaul, 2017, p.3).

⁴ The elasticity of the fascial tissue and its ability to recoil or bounce back to normal when brought out of rest.

⁵ A video demonstration for tensegrity: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Ny3BfhVdw

⁶ See images on the appendix 2

There are many other types of structures that use a tensional network, for example a ball, an atom, DNA, solar systems, and galaxies. As for the human body, the combination of muscles, bones, and fascia structure as a whole is also an example of tensegrity structure.

In the biomechanical structure of animals, in the architecture of a building or in the body of a dancer that works with gravity to do multiple pirouettes while deepening into a demi-plié, or by landing after a big jump. These are all examples of structures that would collapse were it not for the presence of well-functioning force transmission network. Elephants would break their bones just by standing, a skyscraper would fall apart in the mildest earthquake, and a dancer would not jump without injuring him/herself, or even, he/she wouldn't be able to jump at all. On the other hand, the ability of tensegrity structures and of fascia to work optimally using compression and tension makes it possible for (big) (bio)mechanical structures to function efficiently.

5. CLASS PLANNING

5.1 Aims and Themes

I aim to investigate qualities of movement that are strong and flexible as well as attentive and relaxed through the experience of fascia and the tensegrity model. These concepts share a similar approach to the relation between tension and compression within a closed structure. I aim to bring them to class through images, video, explanation, hands-on activities and exploratory exercises, which is intended to combine conceptual thinking, individual movement exploration and executing fixed movement material.

I am interested in observing whether students are able to differentiate between moving mainly through muscle action and engaging the experience of fascia into their movement research.

Other aspects I will bring to class as supportive material are, for example, the awareness of shoulder blades, elbows and hands in the *homologous yielding/push - reach/pull* pattern; sensing the 3-dimensional action of the breath; working with movement *initiations* from distal-limbs, mid-limb joints and proximal joints; and *head-tail* connectivity that encourages the mobility of the spine.

5.2 Class Structure

From Appendix 3 to 5 there are 3 tables containing all the exercises planned to be given in the 3 days of classes, along with a title for each part and the corresponding description, references to what I am looking after on each exercise, and instruction/inspirational guidance for the musician.

The order of the exercises presented on the tables follows the development I wish to attain along the 3 days of classes, which culminates on the performance of learned material with variations and the application of movement qualities inspired by the idea of fascia and tensegrity structures.

Not all exercises will be repeated everyday, and some exercises may be left out of the class if the time is not sufficient to cover everything that has been planned in this class concept.

5.3 Procedure and Teaching Methods

The class starts with a group warm-up; through spoken language I will introduce and guide the students through an exploratory activity inspired, among others, by patterns of developmental movement like *Breath*, *Head-Tail*, *Homologous Push* and *Navel Radiation*, as one finds in the Bartenieff Fundamentals and in Body-Mind Centering (BMC).

I want to remark that the group will already have done a ballet class, so they will be warm. I consider it to be important warming up for my class though, as a way of shifting their awareness to another level and way of perceiving their bodies. The focus of a ballet class can be a lot outwardly directed, for this reason a warm-up will serve to turn the focus of the student to more internal aspects of their body experience. I could call it attention-shift rather than warm-up.

After the “attention-shift” I will work on fixed phrases, with all students facing one direction. There can be a total of 5 phrases along the 3 days of classes, each one with specific focuses. For the transmission of the movement material I will use demonstration as well as spoken language, in which I will use dance vocabulary and words with abstract meaning, since I intend to generate ideas of conceptualized movement, as by speaking of *tendus*, and to generate images of movement quality, as by speaking of *brushing* or *drawing*.

There will be a development regarding the performance of the fixed material. I shall ask the students to change the room orientation, the tempi, the movement quality, to apply variation to the organization of the steps in a sentence as well as to deal with their locomotion aspects.

Furthermore, on the course of the 3 days of classes, I will encourage the students to integrate the

experience of fascia and tensegrity into the phrases. I intend to observe whether it might cause a significant shift in their movement qualities.

Between the fixed material, there will be a section for explanatory activity, where I will introduce the concept of fascia and tensegrity, which will be followed by either a hands-on activity or an individual explorational task. For the communication of these concepts I will use images, video, verbal language and I will do short demonstrations.

The class ends with a *cooling-down* with focus on the awareness of the breath.

As for the use of mirror, it won't be a relevant tool for this class, since it is based on self-awareness and self-orientation, for both active exploration and fixed material.

Between all sections I will ask the students whether they have questions or want to make a personal statement about their momentary state of "body-mind", and at the end of each class I will ask if anyone would like to give a feedback regarding my teaching and the class material.

5.4 Intended Use of Music

The class will be accompanied by a pianist/co-répétiteur. I have integrated into the class planning that follows (appendix 3 to 5) some key words that serve as guidance and inspiration for the musician. I believe that working with live music is a matter of cooperative work, so in that sense I am open for ideas and impulses coming from the music score.

I shall add that I don't have any experience in teaching dance with live music. I am excited to see how that will work for me, for the musician and for the students.

6. CONCLUSION

This concept explores ways of integrating somatic principles in the dance class. Throughout the 3 classes, in which I intend to apply the ideas in this concept, I will be working with some tools of Somatics like *touch*, *developmental movement patterns* and exploratory movement activities.

I am interested in investigating ways of transferring the growing knowledge that I have been acquiring along the past years on the field of Somatics to the context of a dance technique class. With this purpose, I make of this concept and its realization as an object of my research.

I aim to see a shift of awareness regarding the students' quality of motion. I intend to keep searching for the intersections and crossovers between somatic practice and dance.

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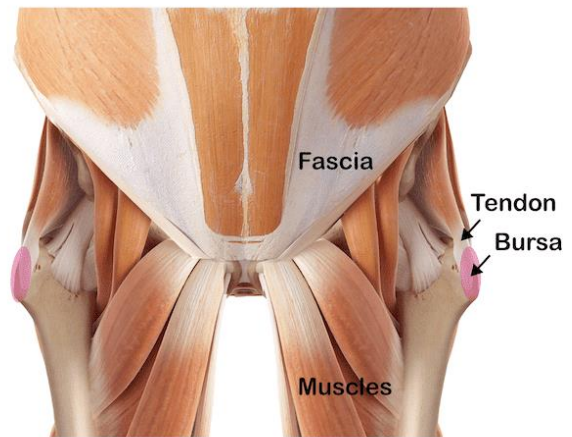
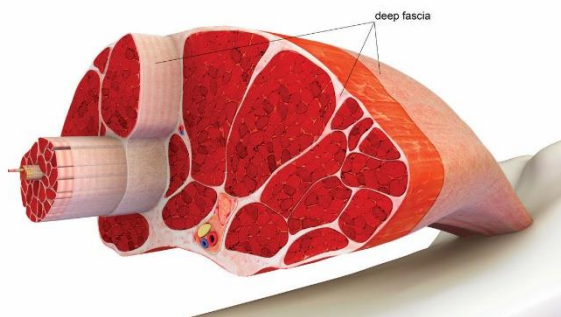
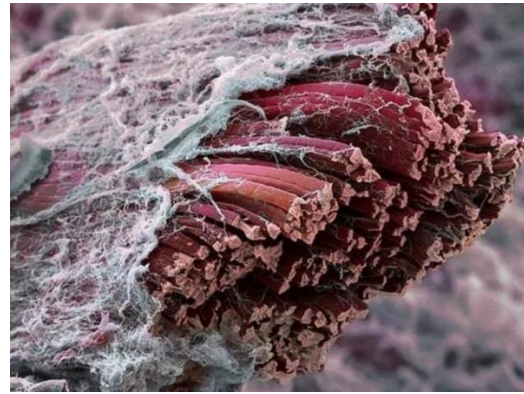
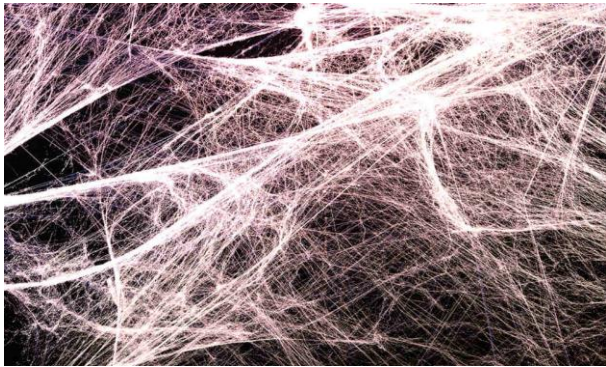
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APPENDIX 1

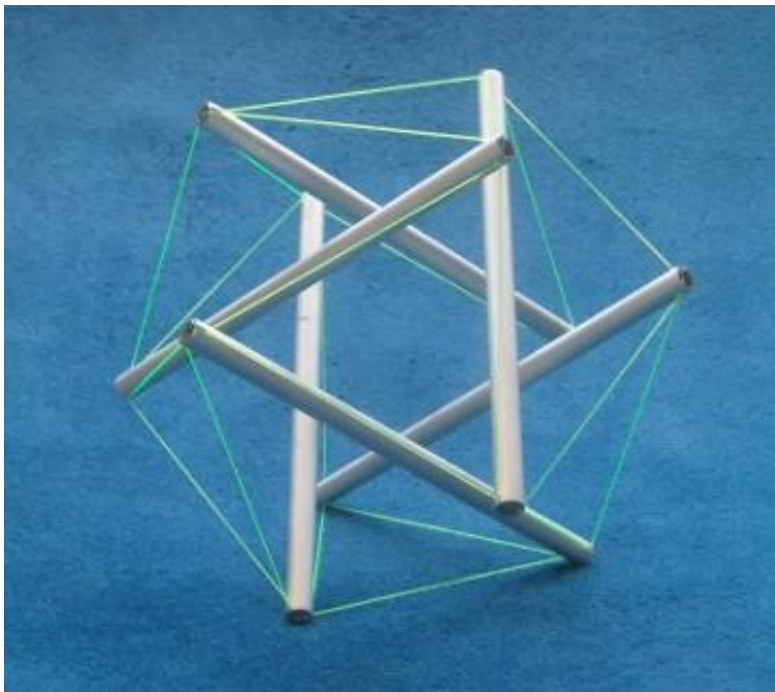
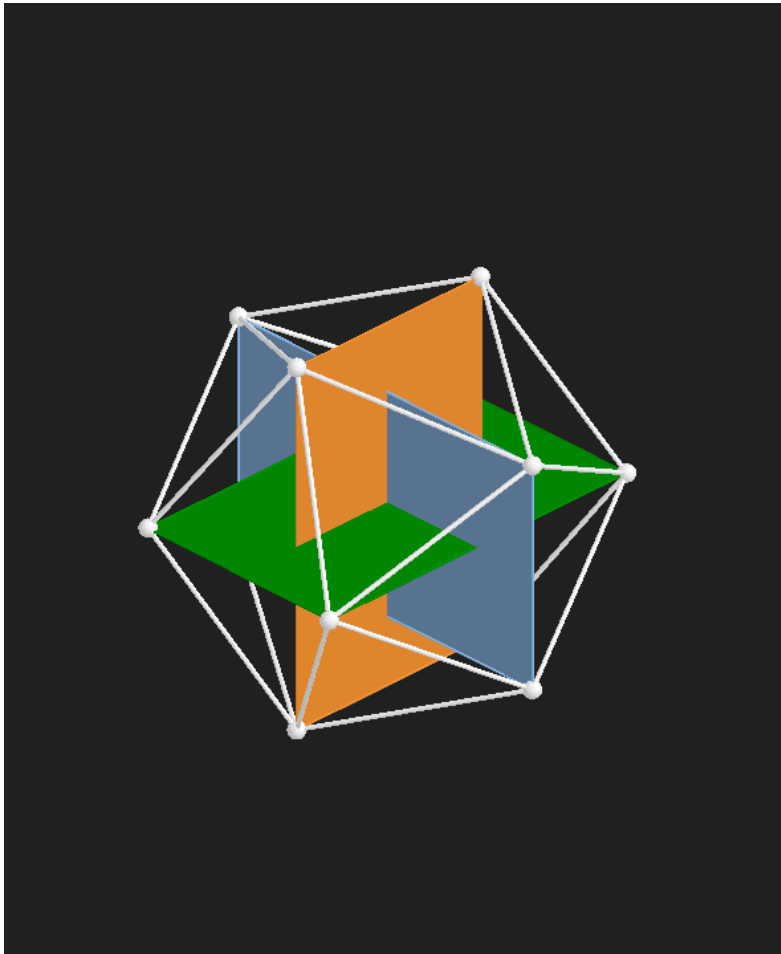


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<https://www.neptunus-wellbeing.nl/de/fascia/>

APPENDIX 2



<https://www.geogebra.org/m/TAHjR5aW> & <http://www.tensegriteit.nl/e-well-known.html>

APPENDIX 6

	DAY 1			DAY 2			DAY 3		
	Section	Name		Section	Name		Section	Name	
1	Warm-up 1	<i>Homologous Push</i>	1	Warm-up 1	<i>Starfish</i>	1	Warm-up 1	<i>Liquid</i>	
2	Warm-up 2	<i>Initiations</i>	2	Warm-up 2	<i>Breath Dimensions</i>	2	Set Phrase 1 and 2	<i>Head-Tail + Circles</i>	
3	Set Phrase 1	<i>Head-Tail</i>	3	Set Phrase 1	<i>Head-Tail</i>	3	Crossings	<i>Crawling Tiger</i>	
4	Set Phrase 2	<i>Circles</i>	4	Set Phrase 2	<i>Circles</i>	4	Floorwork	<i>Sliding</i>	
5	Set Phrase 3	<i>Rolling-up</i>	5	Explanatory Moment	<i>Tensegrity</i>	5	Improvisation	<i>Accessing Fascia</i>	
6	Exploratory Activity (Touch)	<i>Bounciness of Fascia</i>	6	Exploratory Activity	<i>Bounciness of Tensegrity</i>	6	Diagonal	<i>Drawing Circles</i>	
7	Crossings	<i>Crawling Tiger</i>	7	Set Phrase 3	<i>Rolling-up</i>	7	Set Phrase 3	<i>Rolling-up</i>	
8	Floorwork	<i>Sliding</i>	8	Diagonal	<i>Drawing Circles</i>	8	Cooling-down	<i>Breath</i>	
9	Cooling-down	<i>Breath</i>	9	Cooling-down	<i>Breath</i>	9	Feedback		
10	Feedback		10	Feedback					