

ⁱ“BOKKEN RANGA PĀMUDA”: GUT FEELING INSTINCT AND RHETORIC OF SRI LANKAN ACTOR LEARNING

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Abstract

The mental representation of learning as a dominant model of knowledge acquisition has been a long-standing formula for Western pedagogy. Within the sensation-idea-response model, the subject perceives the objects, conceptualizes ideas in the brain, and generates actions through the body. Thus, the relationship between perception and action is hierarchical as the action is secondary to the perception. This epistemological problem is the result of the disembodied mind propagated by the Cartesian tradition. It is no exception when it comes to the discourse of acting: this split has also affected the rhetoric of acting; the actor's mind is regarded as the rational knower and the active mover of the body. However, some actors in Sri Lankan theatre often refer to the phrase 'bokken ranga pāmu' (act from the gut) as a metaphorical expression of how the actor should act truthfully. It further means that the good actor does not act from the heart nor the intellect but from the 'gut instinct' of the body. This metaphorical idea of gut replaces the disembodied rational thinking in the mind with something fleshy embedded in the 'intestine' of the actor's body. In this paper, I want to show how a group of Sri Lankan actors challenge the idea of mental representation of learning by introducing a visceral origination of their knowing and the synergy of thoughts and imagination coupled with the lived body.

Keywords: Mental representation, perception, action, gut instinct, embodiment

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Introduction

The process of actor learning largely dominates and emphasizes the cognitive (mind centered) ways of knowledge acquisition and skill development in acting practices. Actor training systems such as method actingⁱⁱ for instance favours the psychological approach to actor training and learning. Such training systems have not been able to break away from the duality of subject as a perceiver and the object as the perceived. It implies that the actor's learning process is a cycle of perception-idea-responses ([Barnacle 2009](#); [Horn & Wilburn 2005](#)). The expression 'Let your body express what you have in your mind' is an 'instruction' commonly used in such methods ([Zarrilli 2002 p.10-11](#)). While the physical body is devoted to train gestures, movements and postures, creative thinking, imagination, and conceptualisation are considered to be the mind's matters. Particularly in Cartesian theatre ([Riley 2004](#)), performer's process and the acting are seen as a mind over bodywork. What this type of thinking rather does for the actor is subjugating the actor's understanding towards the body and its primacy of being-in-the-midst-of the experience ([Dreyfus 2002](#); [Merleau-Ponty 2002](#)). Body is detached from the embodied nature of actor's experience of knowing in learning situations.

This paper thus attempts to discuss some aspects of the hidden territory of the actor's bodily knowingⁱⁱⁱ (visceral origination of knowing) by introducing experiences of some Sri Lankan actors' acting practices I have gathered through my observations and semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, actors reveal how their metaphorical language embeds the visceral origination of actor learning and apprenticeship as a way of connecting with their lived bodies^{iv}. In doing so, I want to show how these actors' descriptions challenge the idea of 'mental representation of learning'^v in the theatre epistemology.

Gut and the Psyche

The phrase *bokken ranga pāmu* is a Sri Lankan popular jargon most actors use in their daily rhetoric. The meaning of *bokken ranga pāmu* refers to 'act from the gut'. This may seem a bit strange to a non-Sri Lankan actor who does not understand the relationship between acting and the gut. However, the expression of 'gut feeling', 'gut instinct' and 'gutless' are common expressions found in the English-speaking world. The importance of such expression in acting is that this expression literally expresses a corporeal connection of the actor's body to the practice of acting. When someone is emotionally charged, the expression of '*bokkatama denanawa*'^{vi} (I feel in my belly) is also used in colloquial Sinhala language. It means that the emotions are experienced in the belly. Then the question is how does this gut experience the emotions? If the emotions are experienced in the gut, what happens to the mind?

Recent clinical studies have revealed that there are direct links between the gut and the moods^{vii}. Writers like Wilson has argued that in order to understand the relationship between the psyche and the body, our attention needs to be directed from traditional focus of central nervous system and brain to the other parts of the body ([Barnacle 2009](#)). Studies into gut in

Wilson's study challenges the hierarchical relationship maintained between the mind and the body. The gut, for instance functions as an alternative to 'traditional psyche' and functions in two different ways. One aspect of the gut is that it can be functioned as a place where moods could be generated. Secondly the guts work as an opening to the outer world (Barnacle, 2009, p. 25). Starting from the mouth and ending with the anus, the gut works as an open exterior passage, which directly interacts, with the outer world. If the relationship between our gut and the world is healthy then the mood will be healthy. If the relationship is not healthy then the gut will be sick. For instance, when we are hungry, our gut rebels and reacts to the hunger. This may generate the mood changes. This does not mean the changes of the guts affect the psyche. But the gut has a capacity to create the mood of the body. Importantly Wilson's research further suggests that 'gut itself is capable of complex emotional response. In other words, it can get depressed too, as well as angry, excited, anxious and serene' (ibid p. 25).

As these few examples show, the expression *bokka* (gut) could be referred to as the unknown intellectual and the site of emotions. Further the *bokka* is a site of connection to the outer world or literally, a site of inter-subjectivity. Accordingly, the gut instinct is operated as un-reflective awareness of the body that alternates the place of the psyche. Gut can be seen as a place where the emotion, mood and alterity are generated and shared.

Hidden body

In the actor's art, body always vanishes in the wake of the action. Following Merleau-Ponty, Drew Leder discusses how our bodies are hidden in the process of perceptual activities (Johnson 2007 pp. 4-5). Because our intentionality^{viii} is always directed towards an object or an idea, the body hides behind the act of intentionality. Body works as a background in the process of perception. We can see things out there but we cannot see the seeing. Drew Leder coins this as 'focal disappearance' as the hiding of our perceptual organs (Johnson 2007 p. 5) in the act of perception.

However, it is a cat and mouse game that occurs between the body and the intentionality. In most experiences, because our body is hidden, the intentionality resurrects as the psyche. This awareness of disembodied self as psyche begins to guide us as a mind in our daily process of perception. We tend to believe that we could move because we are guided by our desire (will) to move. We are entrapped in a disembodied mind which says in the back of our heads that "we think before we act." Consequently, we forget the fact that our bodies are "acting before we are thinking" (Dewey 1896; Merleau-Ponty 2002). Recent development of phenomenology and cognitive science explores this turn of the resurrection of the body and bodily rooted nature of experience in the human perception and action (Johnson 2007; Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Sheets-Johnstone 2010; Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991). My next intention is to defend such claim by providing some data collected through semi-structured interviews with Sri Lankan actors.

ACT ONE: Dayadeva

Dayadeva is a matured, self-taught actor who has a vast array of tacit knowledge and practical skills gained through on-the-job-training. Dayadeva reveals his experience thus:

I will tell you what I do. At night, I think about what happened in the day time. Let's say that somebody had scolded me yesterday. At night I recall what happened. Although I have not written about what I have gone through, I try to enact the situation again in my mind how, I have confronted and experienced that moment or the situation. Here I use myself as a "character" to imagine the ways I have experienced in this particular situation.

In Rajitha's play 'Sihina Horu Aran' I played the role named 'Piyarathne'. I found this character through me. In most instances, when you read the text, you can really identify with the character. But sometimes, some characters cannot be grasped through the text. When we think about the ways people talk and their intonations, for instance, if this person is a talkative man, and the other one is less talkative, then I assume that this less talkative person might be a bit 'calm' person. So he does not talk very much....once in a while he says a few words,.....So when I read the text, then I sometimes suddenly realise that I can give this kind of "colour" to this role. I instinctively sense it. (Dayadeva E. pers. Comm. 2012).

Dayadeva's approach to acting intersects between the real life situations and how these situations enact in the imaginative circumstances. His recollection of past experience, situation, moods and images eventually intersect with the textual characters he enacts. Rick Kemp identifies two sets of categories that actors could fit in: In 'persona' acting, the actor uses her own bodily demeanour from one character to another; whereas the 'transformational actor' uses a variety of different physical compartments to change her usual daily behaviours ([Kemp 2012 p.137](#))^{ix}. In Dayadeva's case, he is likely to be using 'transformational acting' which allows him to transform his 'sense of self' into a character's self. In both situations, the Actor's body Image and body schema play an important role in the embodiment process of the role ([Kemp 2012 pp. 136-7](#)). Using Narayana's neural model^x, ([Lakoff & Johnson 1999 p. 47-54](#)) we could see how Dayadeva's images, thoughts and propositions are coupled with the sensory-motor function of his body. Let's apply this model thus:

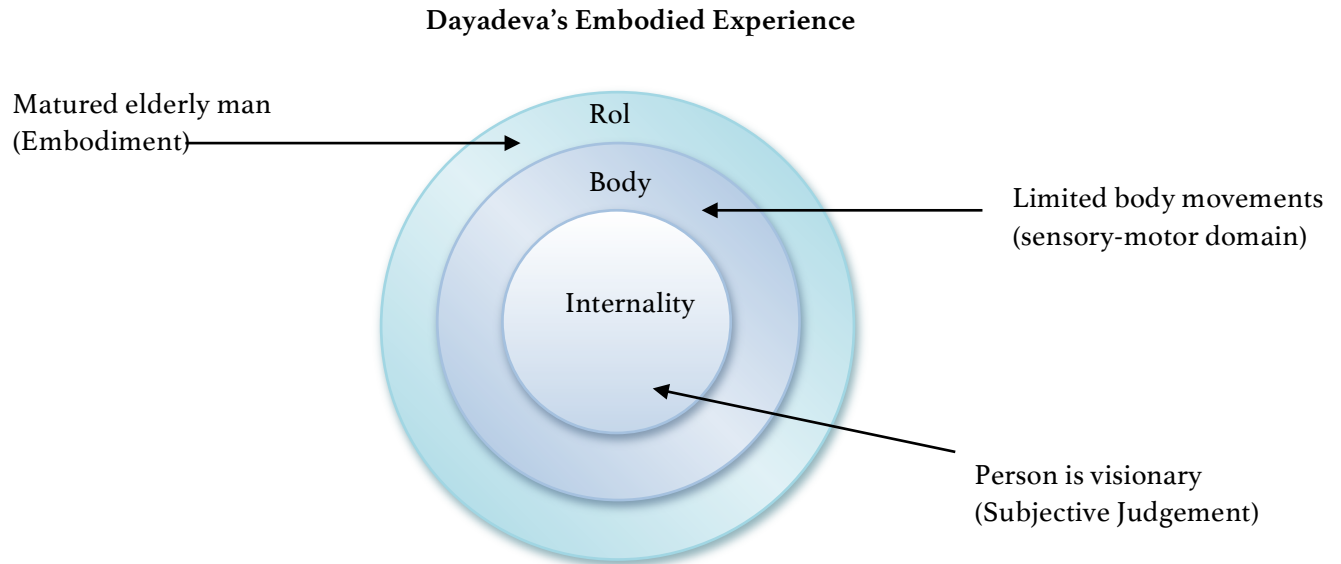
Dayadeva's embodiment:

Metaphor: The person is calm

Subjective judgment: the person is a visionary

Sensory-motor domain: less talkative, few body movements

Embodied experience: the role *Piyarathna* as a matured elderly man with a limited demeanour



When Dayadeva plays the role '*Piyarathna*', he first tries to grasp the role through the way that character is illustrated as a literary figure. In the given text, *Piyarathna* does not talk much. Through this clue he understands the role as a calm, less talkative person. He uses the metaphor of a calm person as a way of understanding the 'internal quality' of the character. One underlying assumption of this approach is that Dayadeva tries to identify certain metaphors, which fit to describe the quality of his role and how those metaphors are linked with his sensory-motor experience. In his sensory-motor domain, this metaphor transforms as few body movements, less talkative person. Whatever subjective judgement that the actor possesses about the insight of the character, the actor needs to convert these images into a bodily experience to be able to enact it as a performance. Hence, Dayadeva realises bodily rooted meaning of such metaphors, thoughts or images, which are mapped and actualised as sensory-motor awareness of his body (Johnson 2007 p. 177). His conceptualisation (thinking) and the action (doing) of the body share the same neural map. As Lackoff and Gallese argue, 'imagination' and 'doing' are not separate 'inner' and 'outer' bodily activities but an enactment of a single fabric (Blair 2009 p.95).

ACT TWO: Jagath

Secondly, I present actor Jagath Manuwarna's conception about acting. Let us listen to his narrative first:

In the rehearsal process, I start with a neutral position. In addition, I do not try to do things purposely. I let myself grow. With others and the director, I let myself grow in the rehearsal process. Yet I do not know whether it is the correct approach or not. And I have a fear to do things. Therefore, the best way to prevent this fear is I to try to be myself. Try to remain unaffected and neutral as possible. My starting point is that neutrality. In the meantime, I try to do a bit of research. I am a YouTube lover. When I am doing a

character, I try to find things on YouTube. Particularly in homemade videos, I try to learn their behaviours because I believe that they are not acted or rehearsed material but are naturally captured by individuals. So there are no ‘characters’ in they are but ‘real people.’ So, how do these ‘real people’ react to those real circumstances? Therefore, I have a thought that I should recreate this ‘reality’ in my acting. How do I play my role without overdoing it? So my approach is that I try to let my ‘natural being’ to be on stage. Again I stress that I try not to add anything to my acting; I try to be like ‘water;’ pure water.’ So the water is me...Jagath Manuwarna. (Jagath M. Pers. Comm. 2012).

Jagath advocates that his body is a ‘growing’ being. His body grows like a ‘plant’ in order to meet the requirements of the character. Yet, he allows his body to ‘grow’ within the parameters of his own bodily demeanour. In Jagath’s description, again we can see how the metaphors play a crucial role in his embodiment. Unlike Dayadeva’s case, Jagath tries to remain unaffected and unmotivated by the unnecessary body comportment. Because, he believes that there is a danger for actors of overdoing (over acting) things. If he does so, the ‘truth claim’ that he intends to achieve in acting is believed to be destroyed. For him, this truth lies in the ‘natural behaviour’ of human beings and he wants to create this ‘naturalism’ on stage. The best way to recreate this natural phenomenon is to present his own self on the stage without any excessive physical codification. He embodies his ‘persona’ in an empathic relationship to the role. If I further apply the same sensory-motor model for his method, it appears like this:

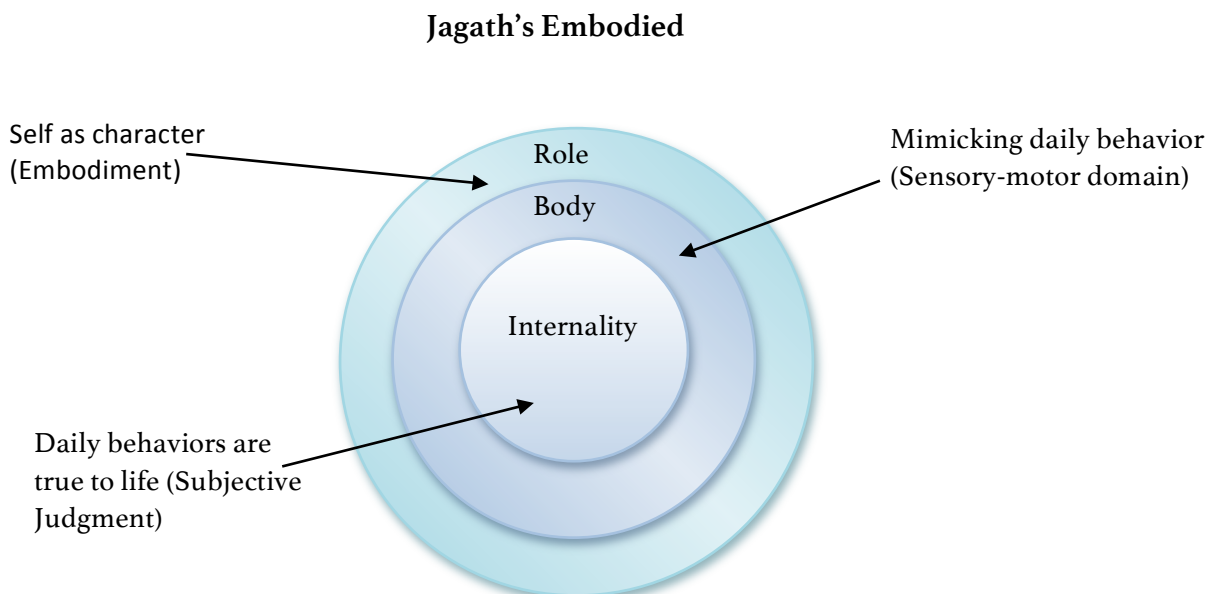
Jagath’s embodiment:

Metaphor: daily life is nature

Subjective judgment: daily behaviors are true to life

Sensory-motor domain: mimicking daily behaviors

Embodied experience: intra-personal reflection of self as character



Jagath's conception of acting is derived from the metaphor of *nature*: that '*daily life is a natural phenomenon*.' His subjective judgment is that the '*daily life is true to life*'. In acting, this subjective judgment appears as sensory-motor experience by mimicking his daily behaviors on stage. What I am interested in both these cases is how Dayadeva and Jagath's subjective judgments, their thoughts and conceptions are a part of the sensorimotor domain, which allows them to embody the experience of acting. Mark Johnson shows us how human cognition is an organic inter-corporeal project between the body and the world. [...] 'The patterns of our engagements are sensory-motor patterns, image schemas, conceptual metaphors, and other imaginative structures' (Johnson, 2007, p. 145).

ACT THREE: Vishvajith

Vishvajith Gunasekara is a contemporary actor working in both theatre and television. He talks about his experience in the Production '*Mother Courage and her Children*' directed by Somalatha Subasinghe.

Then the final light rehearsals were scheduled. I was playing Chaplain's character in the play and I was terrible. Nothing was coming from my acting. My instincts seemed blunt. It was a terrible feeling. Nothing was working for me. My colleagues were also wondering what was happening to me. So we finished the light rehearsal. In the night I received a somewhat shocking message. A girl I was in love with A girl I have been in love with had got married to another man. It was another blow for me. I could not even sleep. I was in pain. The next day, we were having our final light rehearsal prior to the show."

The following day, I woke up early morning and went to the Gal Palliya Church by the BMICH. I was waiting in the foyer to meet a priest. I actually thought that it would help me to understand the character I play. Then a head priest came and I straight away told him my intention. He was stunned and stared at me. I thought he was a bit cross with me. Then I got out of there and headed towards the theatre. It was 9.00 am. The set was mounted on the stage. I didn't know my motivation but I started delivering my lines. I did this while walking through the set. I still don't know how this thing happened. I remember that the workers of the theatre were watching me for hours. Yet I continued my work until 12.00 noon. I had been doing this for three hours and I was feeling that a solid frame was building inside my body. Then in the afternoon, the light rehearsal began. Then I was very much confident because I felt that I had something solid and established to play. During the performance, my co-actor did a sudden reaction to me and again suddenly another reaction came from my body without thinking about it. Alas! Then I heard the colleague actors in the audience laughing. This reaction came without any prior planning. I suddenly realized that I was thrown into my instinct. Even I was surprised and thought how could that happen? Then I realized and said to myself...don't try to find things outside. There is nothing out there. It is in you. You have to find that (Vishvajith G. pers. Comm. 2012).

First, we must see how Narayana's metaphoric model applies to Vishvajith's description. According to him, acting is a mode of being-in-the-enactment. It further implies that the actor experiences the psychophysical equilibrium of 'doing' and 'performing' when it is experienced as an 'enactment.' The metaphor of 'acting is an enactment' could be applied to understand how his body makes meanings in response to this metaphor. Unlike Jagath, he turns his attention to his own body and experiences how the body enlivens within a particular score. After searching for remedies from the outside world, he comes to an understanding that his body is the main meaning making resource for him to be able to act in the performance situations. In the somatic level, he experiences 'unremitting attention' and 'iteration' that cultivate a new 'body mind consciousness'^{xi} for him to be able to successfully, continue his acting task. Let us see how this metaphoric model works for him:

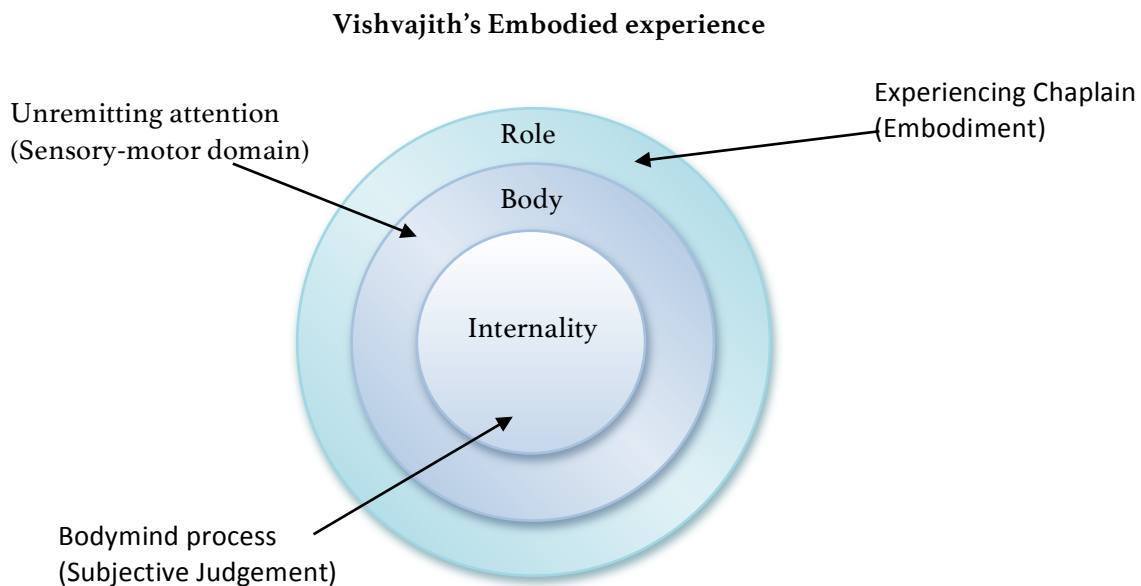
Vishvajith's embodiment:

Metaphor: Acting is enactment

Subjective Judgment: Acting is a body mind process

Sensory-motor domain: Unremitting attention/iteration

Embodied experience: Experiencing the role (Body mind consciousness)



Vishvajith's long description provides an interesting insight into how the actor's body is attuned within a particular score^{xii}. His cognitive process contains many aspects of social as well as personal experiences, images, feelings and thoughts. Yet, his cognitive process is an organic activity, which operates between his body and the environment. Vishvajith's acting operates through this inter-corporeal terrain. He experiences a complete transformation from

his daily behavioral life to a non-daily behavior^{xiii} on the stage by doing his body movements and dialogues repeatedly for a long period. He describes it as forming a 'solid structure' within the body. This 'structure' is the body schema^{xiv} that is sedimenting in his sensory-motor domain. In doing so, Vishvajith acquires a psychosomatic awareness, which allows him to carry out his enactment without any conscious attention.

David Shaner describes this state as second order bodymind consciousness ([Shaner 1985](#)). The actor achieves an assiduous experience through 'unremitting attention' on the body. It dilates the actor's body within a particular physical score. When the physical activity (sensory-motor) is altered, the actor herself could alter her own sense of self ([Kemp 2012](#)). This cultivated a new habit body, which is an automated body for Vishvajith. It further provides the spontaneity, which enlivens Vishvajith's body on stage. This type of acting experience surely can be tagged as the 'acting from the gut' or '*bokken ranga pema*' in the Sri Lankan theatre context.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to understand how the actors thought process, conceptions and imaginations are rooted in the sensory motor domain and how these meanings are transformed as characters they play. Further, I have focused on how their conceptual, imagery and bodily processes are ingrained as a single fabric of enactment. I utilized readings on recent development of cognitive phenomenology to unveil how these cognitive and bodily processes are a result of the actor's bodily networking with its environment. With these descriptions, I argued that knowledge acquisition for actors is not a disembodied collection of some abstract quasi 'ideas' generated in the mind of the actor but a visceral actualization of 'knowing how' through the body.

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Notes:

ⁱⁱ The term Method Acting refers to a dominant mode of actor training system developed by American actor trainers such as Lee Strasburg and Stella Adler. Their actor training systems were largely influenced by Konstantin Stanislavski's early version of actor training approach based on psychological realism propagated by his close disciples in early nineteenth century America (See CARNICKE, S. M. 1998. *Stanislavsky in focus*, Amsterdam, Harwood Academic Publishers).

ⁱⁱⁱ The idea of bodily knowing process refers to the body autonomy that is functioned before the rational speculation of our thinking. It further refers to the autonomic bodily activities we acquire through the process of habituation in our daily life. For an example, human walking is a bodily autonomy that we acquire through cultivating the habit of walking. This knowledge of walking is a pre-reflective bodily knowledge that the human beings gain from their childhood.

^{iv} Lived body is the body that we experienced. Phenomenologist Edmund Husserl provides two sets of words to denote the different existential natures of the body. German word *körper* uses for the physical body or body as an object. The term *Leib* is used for the lived or living body; that is the body we perceive as a subject. Generally, the word 'lived body' presents the body as a non-dualistic, sentient being in contrast to the Cartesian split of body as a machine and the mind as an extended rational soul.

^v Theory of ‘Mental Representation’ suggests that ideas represent in the mind. It adapts the formula of stimulus-idea-response model to argue that human action is the result of stimuli, which generate ideas in the mind, and these ideas trigger bodily actions.

^{vi} The expression of ‘*bokka*’ is further used in different conversational situations. In order to indicate a close relationship with someone, people further use the expression ‘*mage hondama bokka*’ (my dearest belly).

^{vii} Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s influential works such as *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994); *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999); and *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (2003) provide a new way of looking at emotions and how those emotions are connected to reason. In traditional sense, emotions are regarded as the opponent of the rational mind. Yet researchers like Damasio and LeDoux have demonstrated how the human emotions and feelings are generated within the human neural, chemical and physiological bases. Mark Johnston says that our emotions encompass all these three cognitive, brain and physical levels (Johnston 2007, pp.52-68).

^{viii} The term ‘Intentionality’ plays an importance role in many phenomenologist including Husserl (1856-1938), and Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). Husserl found that the human consciousness is always conscious *about* ‘something.’ Merleau-Ponty later developed the idea of ‘motor intentionality’ or ‘Intentional arc’, which explains how our bodies are pre-reflectively intertwined with the world. Our bodies are primarily intending bodies, which make meanings within pre-reflective bodily domains. (See Langer, Monika M. 1989, *Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception: A guide and commentary*. London: Macmillan).

^{ix} In order to differ these two ways of approach to acting, some writers use terms such as ‘personification’ and ‘impersonation.’ However, in popular films genres, actors like Clint Eastwood presents his normal habituation to present the role he plays. This is known as ‘persona acting’. When Ben Kingsley plays the role Gandhi, he transforms himself into a Gandhi’s body demeanour through changing his own body schema. This is called ‘transformational’ acting.

^x Neurologists Srini Narayana and Baily has discovered that human motor schema has high-level control structure. (See more details in Lackoff and Johnson 1999). From a single hand movement of grasping a cup of tea to an abstract thinking such as “what should I do when go to New York tomorrow?” have this structure. Narayana has further discovered that this model correspondence with the semantic structures of any language (Lakoff & Johnson 1999 pp. 41-42).

^{xi} Phenomenologist David Edward Shaner in his influential book ‘*The Bodymind Experience in Japanese Bddhism: A Phenomenological Study of Kukai and Dogen*’ discusses a three modes of bodymind consciousness. I am particularly interested in his analysis of second order bodymind consciousness as it explores how the assiduous practice of a somatic art (acting, dance, sport) could cultivate this bodymind awareness. It is the most primordial, unreflective consciousness one can aware of when the performer’s body is in action.

^{xii} The term ‘score’ is commonly used both in music, dance and acting. In theatre acting, score indicates the actor’s series of physical movements that is developed through improvisation. Once the actor develops this physical score, she/he rehearses the score in order to achieve the body memory within that

score. Grotowski's main actor Ryszard Cieslak once said that score is like a lantern in which that actor's inner flame is flourished every night.

^{xiii} Eugenio Barba developed these terms, daily-behaviour and non-daily behaviour to depict how the performer transforms her habitual body into a specific non-daily habituation. In Kathakali, for instance, actors are trained from very early stage of their careers to transform their bodies into codified gestures. He calls this process acculturation (see Barba, E., & Savarese, N. 2005, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Taylor & Francis).

^{xiv} The term body schema/body image is widely used in phenomenology and cognitive neuroscience. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) describes the phenomenon of body schema as bodily motor intentionality that grasp on the environment (Krasner & Saltz 2006). Sean Gallagher and Meltzoff provide further elaboration to this: For them, the body image is 'the mental representation of varying level of conscious awareness of the body and the body schema is a 'system of motor functions that operates below the self-referential intentionality' (Kemp 2012 p. 136). The idea of bodily dilation and the 'presence' of the actor is always refers to this body schema (Krasner & Saltz 2006). When the performer cultivates a particular somatic practice for a certain period of time, she acquires a dilated body. This dilation is achieved through an assiduous training of bodily movements according to the laws of such practice. In Asian bodymind theory, philosopher Yuasa Yasuo provides an in-depth analysis of body scheme he has developed through Asian self-cultivation theory. (See Yuasa 1993, 1987, Nagatomo Shigenori 1992, and Shaner 1989).