Embodying Daoist Internal Arts: Walking the Line between the Reification and the Instrumental Use of Cognition

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Abstract
Existing research into the body pedagogics of cultural practices emphasises tacit/pre-reflective/corporeal knowledge, yet the role of cognition requires further non-dualist/non-conflationist theoretical elaboration. This article contributes to this task through an ethnographic case study of Daoist Internal Arts (DIA) – eastern self-cultivation practices including neigong, qigong and tai chi. Daoist Internal Arts practitioners employ cognitive thought to facilitate a phenomenological shift from a Cartesian/dualist to a non-dualist mode of embodiment whereby mind and body are experienced in their ontological unity. Yet the effective use of thought in this process requires practitioners to walk a fine line between reifying cognition as a substance separate from corporeality, thus opposing mind and body, and utilising it as an instrument to address corporeality and foster mind–body unity. In underscoring this ambivalent character of cognition, I outline a sociological perspective of embodiment that avoids both dualist and conflationist accounts of cognitive and corporeal dimensions.

Keywords
body pedagogics, cognition, conflationism, corporeality, Daoist Internal Arts, dualism, embodiment, mind–body relationship, phenomenology, reification

Introduction
The Need for a Non-Dualist/Non-Conflationist Theorising of Cognition

By engaging with occupational, sporting, religious and educational contexts, a number of sociological studies concerned with embodiment have in the last decade shed light on
the ways culturally structured practices are learned and incorporated. By focusing on the body pedagogics associated with the transmission of culture – that is, the institutional/organisational means, the experiences and the embodied changes involved in this process – these studies have deepened our understanding of the mutually shaping interactions between our bodies and their surrounding material, social and cultural environments, and the impact of those interactions on the ways we experience and act in and on the social world (Shilling, 2017).

If empirical investigations into body pedagogics have foregrounded the active role of the sensing/feeling body and its tacit/pre-reflective/practical knowledge in the emergence, reproduction and transformation of cultural practices, Shilling (2017) argues that the significance of cognition at a theoretical level remains underdeveloped (see also Burkitt, 1999; Crossley, 2014; Noble and Watkins, 2003). This lacuna appears to be part of a determination to avoid any re-proposition of the disincarnated Cartesian person of early sociological accounts, with its associated mind–body dualism, which also underpins the related culture–nature, language–matter, psychical interiority–corporeal exteriority, voluntarism–determinism and agency–structure divides. Yet, while this concern with avoiding a Cartesian/dualist landscape is certainly legitimate, the two major anti-Cartesian approaches to theorising cognition within sociological studies of the body are not unproblematic.

The first alternative suggests that our conscious deliberations are the product of our body embedded in material, social and cultural environments, yet risks reducing cognition to an epiphenomenon and endorsing an inverted Cartesianism whereby the mind becomes a mere reflection of embodied experience (Leys, 2011; Shilling, 2017; Wetherell, 2012). The second alternative, conceptualising thought and sensory experiences as unified, risks proposing a ‘flat’ monism whereby the distinctive properties attached to the conscious and pre-conscious dimensions of embodiment cannot be distinguished and accounted for – the risk here is of conflating tacit knowledge with our cognitive faculties and failing to specify how agency, creativity and novelty can emerge from their interplay (Burkitt, 1999; Ingold, 2011; Shilling, 2017).

These dilemmas suggest that the Cartesian/anti-Cartesian debate continues to hinder a deeper understanding of the role of our conscious deliberations in their relation with the tacit knowledge of the body. As a number of commentators have observed, there remains a need to address the mind–body relationship and develop accounts of cognition in conjunction with corporeality if we are to understand fully how social actors become enculturated (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Ozawa-De Silva, 2002; Sayer, 2010; Shilling, 2017). My aim in what follows is to approach this research gap in a way that avoids the pitfalls of both dualism and conflationism, while allowing the distinctive properties attached to mind and body, the reflective and pre-reflective, cognition and corporeality, to remain analytically meaningful.

**A Dynamic Relationship: Mind and Body as Attuned and Disattuned**

The founding assumption of this approach holds that the mind–body and cognition–corporeality relationships are dynamic rather than fixed, and can be experienced by the
embodied agent as more or less attuned and disattuned – the two concepts that I employ hereafter for the sake of consistency.

This use of ‘attunement’ resonates with the writings of Heidegger (2010 [1927]: 130–134), who uses the term to refer to a primordial affective orientation – that is, the precondition and ground for the subject–object distinction and our phenomenological world. Although consistent with this conceptual heritage, however, my use of the concept seeks to develop the writings of those within and beyond the pages of Sociology (e.g. Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Burkitt, 1999; Mellor and Shilling, 2014; Shilling, 2017, 2021), who propose an understanding of the distinctive tacit/sensuous/corporeal and conscious dimensions of embodiment as both mutually constitutive and also possessing the capacity to be aligned and disaligned with each other.

In this context, my specific use of ‘attunement’ (and ‘disattunement’) bears affinities with Shilling’s (2017: 1214–1215) discussion of how ‘synchronicities’ and ‘fractures’ can occur between the embodied agent’s corporeal and cognitive dimensions when attempting to develop skills required within cultural milieux. Nevertheless, it is distinctive in referring to the sense of immanent belonging that emerged from the data in relation to those who evoke through their practice a successful shift to a non-dualist mode of embodiment, as will become clearer later.

Cognition and corporeality become attuned, therefore, when these two dimensions are experienced in their ontological unity. Most of us might have experienced this occurrence when, immersed in the natural world, we felt at one with it (Leder, 1990: 165–166). Different and more complex forms of cognition–corporeality attunement include those attained by professional athletes, with the notions of ‘flow’ or ‘being in the zone’ often used in these contexts to describe non-dualist ways of getting to know and acting in the world (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Likewise, within academic circles, a scholar might experience a mind–body unity when writing a journal article. Here a good piece of work will be written – or, perhaps more exactly, it will be experienced as ‘writing itself’ – by employing a kind of knowledge and action that transcends mere cognitive, linear, either/or thought.

These instances involve a radical change in embodied dispositions that allows the access to the actual lived experience of what a social theorist would call a relational ontology – a worldview according to which every ‘thing’, including our bodies and minds, does not pre-exist its relations with other things but rather comes to be through such relations (see Barad, 2007; Wendt, 2015).

Conversely, an instance of cognition–corporeality disattunement is constituted by the challenges of learning to play a musical instrument when our hands appear unable to put into practice on a piano keyboard what we understand at an intellectual level (see Sudnow, 1993 [1978]). If the disattunements involved in learning to play a piano show that the body can be slower than the mind, the situation can also be reversed. As James (1884) famously described it, if we suddenly come across a bear in a forest, we first see the beast, second run away and only then have a conscious realisation of the danger we encountered – here the mind is bypassed by the quicker action of the body. In these instances, dualisms such as mind–body, subject–object or knowing–acting, become phenomenologically salient.
Mind–body Attunement in the Incorporation of Cultural Practices

A number of body pedagogics studies spanning across disparate culturally structured practices such as patrolling (Hockey, 2009), sailing (Andersson et al., 2015), ballet (Aalten, 2007) and video gaming (Ash, 2013), exemplify these arguments and show that the incorporation of these practices is dependent on an adequate degree of attunement occurring between the cognitive and the corporeal dimensions of these activities.

Fell runners in the UK Lake District, for instance, describe non-dualist ways of getting to know and acting in the world as a ‘unifying experience [of] moving in and with the wind, stone, rain’ (Nettleton, 2015: 770). Likewise, when performing a ‘wheelie’ in high-speed motorcycling, there is the phenomenological disappearance of dualist either/or distinctions – mind–body–motorcycle–road are all known ‘simultaneously’ and ‘at once’, so that the rider can:

[K]now without thinking the weight of the motorcycle relative to the engine’s power, the moment when the clutch should be released to generate enough power for the front wheel to rise in a controlled manner, and how the body should be positioned to maintain balance. [. . .]
For a wheelie to be performed successfully, the rider must instantly draw this understanding together as a whole. (Murphy et al., 2019: 435)

Whether descending a fell or performing a wheelie, these individuals do not have the time to be conscious of the action and deliberate if it is safe to position their next step on a particular rock or if the balance between the motorcycle’s weight, the engine’s power and the release of the clutch is accurate. Rather, by attuning cognitive and corporeal types of knowing they effect a process of being conscious in the action (see also Noble and Watkins, 2003).

These arguments have been recently highlighted by Allen-Collinson et al.’s (2018) analysis of high-altitude mountaineering, which shows that mountaineers need to attune conscious deliberations and bodily sensations to find ‘that fine balance [and know] when to say no, when to carry on, which way to go, which way not to go’ (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018: 1336). For example, when attuned with bodily sensations, the cognitive ability to imagine the goal summit can be instrumental in overcoming the mountaineer’s feelings of exhaustion in order that the top of the mountain can be safely reached (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018: 1334). In contrast, instances of mind–body disattunement can distance thoughts and feelings, blunt the ability ‘to recognise when not to endure any further’ and cause a cognitive error – here the mountaineer overestimates her body’s capacities, putting herself in mortal danger (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018: 1329, emphasis in original; see also Allen-Collinson et al., 2018: 1335–1336; Swann et al., 2016).

The Dynamic Character of the Mind–Body Relationship and Daoist Internal Arts

It is this dynamism characterising the relationship between mind and body, and the attunements and disattunements occurring between cognitive and corporeal knowing, that I investigate further via an ethnographic case study into Daoist Internal Arts.
(DIA) – eastern self-cultivation practices such as neigong, qigong and tai chi chuan. Especially apt for this study’s empirically informed theoretical exploration of the relationship between cognition and corporeality, these practices are themselves based on a perspective of embodiment that explicitly acknowledges that the mind–body relationship is amenable to change, and its terms can be experienced as attuned and disattuned, even though they are ontologically indivisible (Ozawa-De Silva, 2002; Yuasa, 1987). Here the experiential unity of mind and body is not thought of as given, but needs to be achieved through body pedagogics specifically designed to obtain radical alterations of one’s embodied dispositions so that dualism and a Cartesian binary either/or logic is left behind in favour of a correlative ‘duality in unity’ and a non-dualist/non-linear logic (Nagatomo, 1993; Yuasa, 1993).

In what follows, I illustrate how distinctive properties of cognition such as abstract thought, language and an analytical binary either/or logic are used by DIA practitioners as instruments to identify a pre-conscious corporeality and encourage a shift to a non-dualist mode of embodiment. In so doing, however, I underscore the ambivalent character of cognition: its use involves ‘walking a fine line’ between a productive recognition that a unity of conscious thought and tacit knowledge of the body can be achieved, and an unproductive reliance on a cognitive activity disattuned with corporeality, which practitioners try to escape. While there is, for the DIA practitioner, no ontological dualism, the potential exists for unity and separation of mind and body at the experiential level – here there is neither dualism nor conflation. However, before delving deeper into these issues, I first outline the methodology employed by the study.

**Methodology**

Although the choice of eastern self-cultivation practices as a case study has roots in my background as a Zen Shiatsu1 therapist, I began my empirical exploration as a novice DIA practitioner. The ethnographic work I carried out took place between January 2016 and May 2017 across DIA classes in London and the south-east of England. Two-thirds of the 15 participants who took part in the research were female. The majority were older than 40, had a middle-class background and were educated to degree level or above – indeed, four of them were or had been academics. All the participants were British apart from two Italians, a Chilean and a Korean. While the gender, social class and age of the participants appear to reflect the constitution of the classes I attended and are consistent with the typology of people engaging in self-cultivation eastern practices within a western context found in past studies (e.g. Ryan, 2002), it is important to note that my findings are gender, class and age distinctive.

Participants were recruited from the DIA classes I attended, as well as through adverts, leaflets and the snowball sampling technique. In adverts, leaflets and personal communications, I made clear the study rationale and explained the nature of the interview: an informal chat of about an hour where the participant’s views and opinions of, and experiences with, DIA would be discussed. Participants also read and kept an information sheet, and signed a consent form before taking part in the research. In order to ensure respondents’ anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. British Sociological
Association (2017) ethical guidelines were followed, and ethical approval was obtained by the Research Ethics Committee of the researcher’s institution.

Despite the wide range of variations, DIA converge in promoting ‘external’ martial art combat skills and ‘internal’ cultivation targeting pre-conscious/tacit/corporeal knowledge (Channon and Jennings, 2014; Ryan, 2008). The focus of this research is on this latter aspect, which Foucault (2005: 15) would call ‘spirituality’ – that is, ‘the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself [sic]’. This includes longevity practices aiming at addressing soft tissues, joints, bones, internal organs, and thus at changing the practitioner’s physiological functions (Frantzis, 2006 [1993]). Among these practices, neigong constitutes the internal foundation and ‘grammar’ of all DIA, qigong is used more in relation to health/medical issues, while tai chi indicates either a health exercise or self-defence training (Frantzis, 2006 [1993]).

There has been a proliferation of investigations into Daoist and other types of eastern practices in the last decade (Channon and Jennings, 2014), but only a few studies exist on how their body pedagogics bring about radical changes of deeply embodied habits (e.g. Beaupre, 2011; Brown and Leledaki, 2010). However, if this research gap is indirectly addressed by the present study, my concern is with DIA as a pragmatic exemplification of the dynamic character of the mind–body relationship, which facilitates the construction of a non-dualist and non-conflationist conceptualisation of cognitive and corporeal knowledge, and which enables the identification of the role of cognition in the incorporation of cultural practices. Accordingly, the ethnographic case study was designed to account for the distinctive properties attached to the cognitive and corporeal dimensions of embodiment, and was developed via a phenomenological perspective with the assistance of participant observation, auto-ethnography and in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Allowing access to the way the world is experienced and engaged with by other people, participant observation plays a crucial role in the ethnographic process. This entails joining participants in the same practical activity and thus learning to attend to things and understand what it is possible or not to afford in the practice one is involved in, as would any novice practitioner (Pink, 2009).

While participant observation involves particular attention to the body, the senses and those feelings that tend to escape verbalisation, this concern is especially significant for research focused on the relationship between conscious and pre-conscious dimensions of embodiment. Endorsing Wacquant’s, 2006 [2004]: viii, emphasis in original) proposition of ‘a sociology not only of the body, in the sense of object, but also from the body, that is, deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge’, I have especially paid attention to sensory registers and bodily changes by employing auto-ethnography (see Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2005), which includes an auto-ethnographic diary of the researcher’s lived experience.

In-depth semi-structured interviews are an essential tool for gaining insight into informants’ experiences. However, due to the nature of the study, I invited participants to bring in a representational form of initially blurred and difficult-to-verbalise embodied experiences by employing metaphors, images, colours or single words (see Nielsen, 2009). Furthermore, my investigation expanded its scope through the internet – a source
that most participants appeared to draw on in different guises. Therefore, in addition to the interviews, I have also transcribed talks occurring in online videos, and included in my analysis texts from DIA-dedicated websites. Indeed, the research’s outcome reinforced previous findings that identified common narratives across various sources, such as interviews, and dedicated websites and literature (see Elliott and Squire, 2017).

Taken together, the set of methods used by the present research aimed at addressing the in-between space both separating and uniting what we are conscious of and what we are not fully aware of, the explicit and the implicit, or, again, the cognitive and the corporeal. This is the slippery territory that is the chief concern of the phenomenological approach adopted by this study. Rather than addressing ‘what things are’, phenomenology is attentive to ‘how things are given’ (Van Manen, 2014) — how they disclose themselves to us as meaningful by means of our lived body, which is ‘our general medium for having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]: 169). In phenomenological terms this is the epoché — the bracketing of one’s assumptions, abstractions and theoretical meanings in favour of concrete experiential facts (Van Manen, 2014).

Yet, the epoché is only the first step of a phenomenological approach, as what follows is the description, interpretation and attribution of meaning to these experiences by employing our reflexive capacities (Van Manen, 2014). In this way, the data analysis aimed to produce emergent meanings from the interlacement of reflective/reflexive meanings affixed to the body and the pre-reflective meanings enacted by the body (see also Wacquant, 2006 [2004]).

Consistent with a phenomenological approach, when analysing data, I employed the guidelines provided by Van Manen (2014): armed with paper, pencils and removable adhesive index flags, as well as through extensive note-taking, I aimed to become familiar with the data while at the same time reflexively relating them to the auto-ethnographic diary — again, here there was the mutual shaping of the representational (transcriptions and texts) and non-representational (researcher’s lived experience) dimensions.

As for ‘coding’, I followed Van Manen’s (2014: 319–323) suggestion and aimed at consistency between three levels of reading: ‘wholistic’ — attending to the data as a whole; ‘selective’ — identifying excerpts of data that are especially evocative and can be used as rhetorical devices; and ‘for detail’ — focusing on single sentences that can be particularly revealing about the phenomenon analysed.

### The Case Study

**From a Dualist to a Non-Dualist Mode of Embodiment: The Phenomenological Disappearance of Dualism(s)**

Designed to attune mind and body, the aim of DIA is the shift to a non-dualist mode of embodiment. In the words of Shilling and Mellor (2007: 539, emphasis in original), Daoist body pedagogics seek to achieve ‘a state of immanence with respect to the environment’ — what my chief DIA instructor Brian describes as a ‘non-dual state’. Interviews with DIA practitioners substantiate these arguments: when practising, Michael feels like ‘being wider [. . .] extend[ing] further [. . .] almost like a field’, Ji-A reports a ‘sensation of one energy field [. . . a] sense of connection, sense of oneness, sense of presence [. . .]
kind of there’s no me, there’s no track of time [. . . a] much more bigger [sic] sense of myself’, while Catherine explains:

It’s being intensely present in the world [. . . ] your self, kind of it doesn’t end at your skin but sort of disperses off through all the other stuff that is you. [. . . I]t does . . . feel as though my self is more dispersed. [. . . ] I don’t feel, I don’t feel so discrete from the rest of the world.

Likewise, after a good home DIA session, I concluded my auto-ethnographic account by questioning the very existence of the experiencing ‘I’: ‘There is no past, present, and future. I am indeed one: mind–body–my living room–the world. Or, is there no “I” here?’

This phenomenological disappearance of dualism(s) goes hand in hand with the disappearance of the binary either/or logic characterising cognition and the access to the actual lived experience of the processual nature of the world according to which all things exist in relation to each other. The way Daoist educator Frantzis (Energy Arts, 2013) describes it evokes the wheelie performance in high-speed motorcycling we saw earlier:

[Y]our mind starts relaxing and it just encompasses the entire space so it’s in everything that you can see all at once.

And that includes your body all at once. There’s no part of it that’s not there so that anything that’s off is recognised as opposed to oh, I recognise this but urgh, lost it, lost my feet, lost my back. It’s my mind going for, this part of my mind is fine but the rest of it’s gone to lunch. No, the more you relax your mind, everything is in it at once. It’s all there simultaneously.

Yet, and crucially, if the incorporation of DIA entails a shift to a non-dualist/non-linear logic, this does not imply that the properties of cognition and the attached binary either/or logic play a redundant/epiphenomenal role in this process. Rather, cognitive properties are an essential instrument to tap into, and facilitate changes at the level of, the tacit knowledge of the body. To succeed, however, not only do practitioners need to recognise that the mind–body relationship is amenable to change, but, in practical terms, they also have to walk the fine line involved in discerning the instrumental use of the properties of cognition at an epistemological level from the reification of thought as an immaterial substance ontologically separate from corporeality. In other words, what needs to be avoided here is to become so reliant upon cognitive faculties that they turn into an obstacle to mind–body attunement. This is the mistake we saw made by the mountaineer who is unable to safely reach the summit because her idea of what is possible is detached from her physical needs.

**Avoiding the Cartesian Reification: Walking the Line**

Walking the line between the reification and the instrumental use of cognition is the ongoing struggle for DIA practitioners. This is evident in my auto-ethnographic diary, which, frustratingly, abounds with extracts similar to that below:
Well, I couldn’t really get into the standing\textsuperscript{2} today [. . .] My body was perceived in so many different ‘pieces’! Similarly, my mind was always wandering away from my body. I focus on bringing the chi\textsuperscript{3} down but then I cannot pay attention to the upper part of my body. I focus on releasing my pelvis but then my quadriceps get tense. I focus on breathing in my belly and forget all the rest! I can only focus on one bit at a time and cannot feel everything as one: the feeling of a balloon in my chest, throat and under my armpits, feet grounded, not to mention the left and right balance and my stuck right hip joint! Not only mind and body but, in more prosaic terms, left and right are very disconnected and I ended my standing leaning to the left!

Here dualism and the attached binary either/or logic according to which the world is made up of separate entities remained phenomenologically salient – I could not experience my ‘body all at once’, as suggested earlier by Frantzis. Likewise, DIA instructor Kleiman (2013) recalls that, when trying to address his energy gates,\textsuperscript{4} he failed to walk the line and reified a representational level for a long time before attuning his conscious mind with his sensory knowing:

[T]he mistake that I did was to try to visualise a bunch of dots all over your body. I did that for years when I first started this practice, and finally I realised I was so stuck in the visualisation that I took three years and I didn’t do any gate work, I just did feel the body, feel the body, feel the body, sink down through the body, sink my chi, get a sense of something dropping through, and when I came back to the gates [. . .] I had such a better feeling for what the inside of my body was and what my energy was, that . . . and then the gates made sense from a felt point of view, not a visualised dot point of view.

It is vital to note, however, that Kleiman’s eventual success in attuning cognitive and corporeal dimensions could not have occurred without the employment of the very analytical thinking and binary either/or logic he succeeded in transcending. Without knowing where the energy gates are located, Kleiman might have never been able to feel them – he knew what he was looking for. Consistent with extant body pedagogics research, the incorporation of DIA involves the mutual shaping of cognitive and corporeal understandings (see Shilling, 2017).

And yet, this is not a matter of cognition acting upon corporeality as a transcendent Cartesian mind would upon a passive body. Rather, our conscious deliberations possess an ambivalent character, as they can be effective instruments to create the conditions for those bodily changes to take place, but can also detach us from our corporeal dimension and hinder any change at the level of the tacit knowledge of the body. It is in this non-conflationist (as the distinctiveness of the cognitive and corporeal dimensions is acknowledged) and non-dualist (as mind and body are not two distinct entities acting on each other) manner that the properties of cognition are instrumentally employed by practitioners to embody DIA.

\textbf{The Ambivalent Character of the Properties of Cognition}

Refined over thousands of years, fine analytical distinctions are crucial in DIA. If, for the advanced practitioner, these include hundreds of ‘energy channels’, ‘flows’ and ‘gates’, the beginner is however faced with a meticulous description of the basic standing
posture, which includes the precise position of every part of the body: from the feet, via the tailbone, to the exact place the tongue needs to rest on the palate (Frantzis, 2006 [1993]: 96–104).

However, the DIA practitioner always has to bear in mind that cognition, an either/or logic, and the attached analytical distinctions are a means not an end – the aim is the attunement of thought and feeling. As advised by DIA instructor Myers (Theosophical Society, 2015), one has always to ask herself: ‘can you actually feel what’s happening in your body rather than just thinking about it?’

When reiterating these arguments, Brian reveals the ambivalent character of cognition. My field notes indicate that Brian repeatedly warns his students ‘to not make intellectual objects [because] intellectual analysis breaks things down but is not real knowledge’. Furthermore, Brian invites students to engage in ‘direct perception’ and access the ‘real information happening behind the words’. Yet, during a lesson, he also spends several minutes providing detailed verbal explanation, and fosters debate, reflection and sophisticated intellectual analysis on practice during our class tea breaks, specifically designed by him for this purpose.

When probed on the matter during an interview, Brian makes clear that a property of cognition such as language is extremely useful, but it is only a means which must not be mistaken for the end – the end being what he calls the ‘unity of knowledge and action’:

Language is really, really important. But at a certain point you then need to look at your, what it points at [. . .] And this school is particularly articulate. Most schools don’t talk about this stuff the way we talk about it [. . .] I’ve seen lots of people who’ve, who’ve done the other thing as well. You just stand there and you see what happens, and . . . they get some of it but they don’t get all of it, because . . . yeah, the words are really useful, so when Bruce [Frantzis, Brian’s chief instructor] starts saying things like . . . you know, ‘There’s this energy channel happening here, now . . . I’m doing it to you, can you feel it?’ You know what to look for. Other than just standing there and you get this – vague idea that something’s happening.

Evoking Heidegger in order to oppose a Cartesian/representationalist view of language, Csordas (1994: 11) notes that ‘language not only represents or refers, but “discloses” our being-in-the-world’. Similarly, Brian seems to suggest that, while language can remain on an abstract representational level, it can also reveal and bring into awareness corporeality – again, the practitioner has to walk the fine line distinguishing the former instance from the latter.

Likewise, when during an interview I asked her if, when teaching, she uses language, metaphors and mental visualisations, aware of the danger of a misuse of the properties of cognition, DIA instructor Danielle appears at first suspicious and says:

[W]e’re bringing the awareness into the head a lot more if you’re trying to do the visualisations, whereas actually what you want is to . . . you may, you might want people to be aware of their feet or their hips or something like that. So erm . . . no, I tend not to use the visualisations.

However, when I note that she actually does use these instruments in her classes, Danielle explains that these are employed in a pragmatic manner:
It’s a very practical thing, isn’t it? [. . .] you can say oh like draw the breath up from the, the floor . . . you know, what . . . you might mean is like oh you’re going to like open the blood vessels, but you can’t tell people to do that. You, you need to tell them in a, a simple thing that they can try and then hopefully they will feel something and then when they feel, start to feel it, then they feel what the thing is that you’re trying to tell them.

When interviewed, most participants restated Danielle’s arguments. Practitioner Alice uses images such as having a ‘tap below the bellybutton’ to become aware of her lower dantien, or ‘imagining air like water’ to improve her breathing technique. For Alice these are instrumental visualisations, ‘images . . . to do things’ – an observation that resonates with those of practitioners Francisca, who employs images ‘to do it’, and Hannah, who thinks that ‘it’s all very . . . kind of pragmatic’. In turn, these accounts evoke Shilling’s (2017: 1210, emphasis in original) emphasis on the importance of the ‘affective weight of concepts and symbols’ and of the power of a metaphor at the representational level to target the affective dimension at the non-representational level.

However, given that the line separating the instrumental use of cognition from its reification is a very fine one, how do practitioners actually distinguish between these two instances? In fact, while the lived experience of the relational character of the world is the aim of DIA, it is also at a relational level, where representational and non-representational dimensions are shared, that practitioners can deal with the ambivalent character of cognition, walk the line and incorporate DIA.

Sharing Cognitive and Corporeal Dimensions: Embodying DIA as a Collective Achievement

Related to a neigong set called Gods Playing in the Clouds, the following field notes illustrate how the embodiment of DIA is socially produced. Here Brian was engaging in one of his detailed verbal explanations. A shared symbolic and sensorial repertoire ensured that the words used by Brian were not remaining on a disembodied and abstract dimension, disattuned with the sensory kind of knowing and doing attached to the move he intended to teach:

At one point there was a discussion in the class about a specific type of ‘wrapping feeling’ that one should experience when standing, and somehow in a more significant manner when doing the kwa squat during the Gods [Playing in the Clouds]. Brian was explaining that we needed to address ‘a layer in your leg that feels slightly ‘fluidy’. Someone asked if the feeling Brian was talking about was similar to the feeling attached to a particular movement present in the Wu style tai chi form (I could not grasp the name of the movement). Brian replied, ‘no, that feels more “material”’.

It is during moments like those above, within a relational dimension, that practitioners can orientate themselves in a wide range of previously unknown concepts and novel subtle sensations, attune their cognitive and corporeal understanding and make radical changes in their modes of embodiment.
This point is reiterated by the field notes extract below, where, to figure out ‘a feeling of emptiness/void in the [hip] joint’ I experienced when learning a new move, in the following DIA class I asked fellow practitioner Ji-A what she felt during that exercise:

[Ji-A] said that she felt a change from a feeling of the joint with the bones attached and rotating one on the other – she called this the ‘normal feeling’ – to a feeling as if there was a space between the bones rotating. Indeed, I thought it very similar if not identical to the feeling I experienced with my empty/void space.

Making sense of a novel feeling with a fellow practitioner allowed me to integrate it with my intellectual understanding and progress towards the incorporation of DIA. In fact, the data collected by the present study consolidate the argument that the embodiment of a culturally structured practice takes place by means of inter-subjective and inter-corporeal dynamics, where both intellectual and physical kinds of knowing are shared and used in conjunction (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Shilling, 2017). In this respect, my field notes show that training in classes always involves two or more practitioners, who engage in a considerable amount of touching, observing and talking.

When, for instance, a practitioner intends to learn how to open and close a wrist joint, she will first hear the verbal explanation provided by her instructor and then will work with a fellow practitioner taking turns in gently opening and closing each other’s wrists. After she has acquired a fairer embodied knowledge of the novel feeling attached to this very minute movement, the next step will involve touching the wrist of a more expert practitioner or instructor and experiencing under her own hands how someone can open and close the joint without anyone else’s help.

It is only by means of relentless repetition of these exercises, and always through a multi-dimensional – cognitive and corporeal – interaction with other, fellow practitioners and instructors, that the practitioner will gradually learn to open and close her own wrist in a circular, mutually constitutive process, according to which novel feelings bring about novel intellectual understanding which, in turn, brings about novel feelings, and so on, to the point of bringing about radical changes in embodied dispositions. As with any other culturally structured practice mentioned in the present article, the incorporation of DIA is not an individual enterprise. The skills involved in walking the line and the associated shift to a non-dualist mode of embodiment, as in any other body pedagogics, must be collectively learned and achieved – they are, above all, a social achievement.

**Concluding Remarks**

By exploring how the relationships between mind and body, and cognition and corporeality, come to be forged, and how they can be transformed, this ethnographic case study of DIA contributes to long-standing debates on the relationship between our reflexive capacities and the habitus (e.g. Archer, 2010; Crossley, 2014; Mouzelis, 2008; Sayer, 2010; Shilling, 2008; Wacquant, 2014a, 2014b). These debates reflect the mind–body problematics addressed by this article: while it seems clear that both pre-conscious habitus and conscious deliberations are necessary for enabling embodied agents to navigate socio-cultural environments, the peril here is that, if we do not adequately conceptualise
the relationship between the two forms of knowledge, we can slip into either a conflated monism where society, bodily knowledge and our cognitive faculties are always symmetrical, allowing no room for innovation, or an unbridgeable dualist gap between cognitive and corporeal knowing (Shilling, 2008, 2017).

Seeking to avoid these alternatives, this article has developed further the arguments advanced in Sociology by Allen-Collinson et al. (2018) and Shilling (2017), who point out that the incorporation of culturally structured practices, and their associated embodied changes, are a collective endeavour involving the mutual shaping of cognitive and corporeal knowing – each of which is characterised by its own distinctive properties. More broadly, this article also engages further with contemporary sociological debates by addressing Shilling’s (2017) related call for a non-dualist/non-conflationist theoretical elaboration of cognition through a focus on the ambivalent character of cognition.

In particular, by illuminating how the tacit knowledge of the body can be consciously accessed, this study reinforces the arguments of those who argue that deeply embodied habits might be more permeable to conscious processes than previously thought (Archer, 2012). Contra Descartes, mind and body are not separated by an ontological dualism, and neither can the body be reduced to cognition. As the DIA instructor Brian stated on numerous occasions, ‘the mind cannot tell the body what to do’. Instead, and in sympathy with Dewey (2012 [1922]: 15–20; see also Pedwell, 2017), this case study suggests that an effective strategy to change habitual ways of getting to know and acting in the world must involve the synergic attunement of reflective, pre-reflective, individual and collective dimensions.

More precisely, while our conscious deliberations may allow us to orientate ourselves in the social world by evaluating our circumstances from a seemingly disembodied perspective (Archer, 2010; Dewey, 2012 [1922]), they risk detaching us from the fleshly body and the environment to the point of hindering our agentic capacities. In this context, if DIA practitioners are to effect significant changes in themselves, they need to accomplish the difficult task of walking the line between achieving an instrumental distance from, while maintaining a connection with, their bodies and material surroundings.

The metaphor of ‘walking the line’ between the reification and the instrumental use of cognition employed in this article also draws our attention to the fine conceptual difference between the problematic dualist idea of two separate entities acting on each other and the useful analytical distinction between the multiple dimensions characterising our lived experience and their distinctive properties. In this respect, this article endorses and revitalises the arguments of Leder (1990), who points out that immaterial and material experiential dimensions are structural aspects of humans’ embodied character rather than Cartesian artefacts.7 This analytical distinction between the immaterial and material dimensions of embodiment suggests that a theorising of embodiment from the body (Wacquant, 2006 [2004]) should not be evaluated as preferable to, but as a necessary counterpart of, theories of the body focused on the foundational aspects of our embodied condition (Burkitt, 1999).

It is from this grounding that this article poses the question of whether dualist and non-dualist ways of getting to know and acting in the world are not simply analytical constructs, but are in a very real sense constitutive potentialities of human embodiment. Dualist and non-dualist modes of embodiment – one characterised by a binary either/or
logic and the other by a non-dualist/non-linear logic – are indeed recognised by those eastern perspectives in which DIA are connected, and also in ancient Greek philosophy, in the medieval scholastic tradition (Pieper, 2009 [1963]), and in Spinoza’s (1996 [1677]) dualist finite mode and non-dualist infinite mode, which were subsequently re-elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari (2013 [1988]) as the plan(e) of organisation and the plane of consistency.

Each of these traditions suggests that humans confront the challenge of aligning the distinctive properties associated with reflexive deliberations and physical being, an issue that is as sociologically and societally important now as it has ever been. In fact, if one agrees with those thinkers (e.g. Elias, 2000 [1939]; Heidegger, 1977 [1954]; McGilchrist, 2010 [2009]) who hold late modern times to be characterised by instrumental rationalism, environmentally damaging attempts to conquer nature, and a growing detachment from the sensuous and carnal dimensions of our existence, then the power relationships involved in being able to shape body pedagogics that foster interconnection and immittance, rather than separation and detachment, are surely worthy of further empirical exploration.

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Notes
1. Zen Shiatsu is a Japanese and modern form of complementary and alternative medicine drawing on the Buddhist tradition, Daoist principles and Traditional Chinese Medicine (Masunaga and Ohashi, 2001 [1977]).
2. ‘Standing’ is a colloquial term referring to a basic posture in neigong practices. Also called Jan Juang, the posture is designed to teach the practitioner to stand with the least possible effort and ‘sink’ – that is, to reach ‘a state in which the body loses all unnecessary bindings, all resistances, all tension’ (Cavel, 2016: 2).
3. A key notion in Daoist practices, in very simple terms, chi is a psychophysical energy permeating the universe, which has a simultaneous effect on both mind and body (Yuasa, 1987).
4. According to Frantzis (2006 [1993]: 129, emphasis in original), energy gates are ‘major relay stations of the body, where the strength of the life current (chi) moving through the system is regulated’.
5. Located two or three inches below the navel, the dantien is the most important energy gate – the energetic core of the body (Frantzis, 2006 [1993]: 138).

6. The kwa squat is a key pelvic movement present in all forms of DIA (Frantzis, 2006 [1993]).

7. What instead is to blame for the Cartesian paradigm, Leder (1990: 115) contended, is Descartes’ ontological conclusion: the reification of the mind as a substance separate from the body (see also Burkitt, 1999; Csordas, 1994).

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