

EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement

OPEN ACCESS

Chapter 21
Amerta Movement and Autism

Sean Williams

Edited by:
Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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A Balinese Saying

Ilmu Padi (a lesson from the rice plant)

semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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21. AMERTA MOVEMENT AND AUTISM

Therapy, Communication, Collaboration and Art

Sean Williams (UK)

On a bright and sunny day in a garden in Wales, Prapto asked me about my work with my clients on the autistic spectrum¹, and if I could show him what I did through movement. After several minutes of interacting in movement with a colleague in the group, who wonderfully embodied the fragility of someone on the autistic spectrum, Prapto began to talk with remarkable yet practical insight about my world of being with people on the autistic spectrum. He was able to see ‘where I was coming from’. He explained how I needed to understand the people I was working with and how I could stimulate growth for them rather than fixing, pacifying or trying to educate them in ways they weren’t ready for.

Since 1999 I have been working as a developmental specialist²,

1 The autistic spectrum describes a range of neurodevelopmental conditions that include diagnoses of autism, Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and Rett syndrome, as defined by *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 5th ed. in 2013. Those on the autistic spectrum “share a triad of impaired social interaction, communication, and imagination, associated with a rigid repetitive pattern of behaviour. Onset is usually at birth or during the first three years of life but problems can begin in later childhood.” (Wing 1996)

2 Developmental specialists specifically look at the development of an individual from conception to the present day. Developmental specialists do not address one specific area but instead look at a person globally (e.g. cognitive skills, language and communication, social-emotional skills and behaviour, gross and fine motor skills, and self-help skills) and identify areas of need and of strength. They develop activities designed to help the individual overcome their challenges and improve their skills and ability to learn. This enhances functioning in their daily living, education, work, play, leisure, communication and social participation.

educator and play therapist, with the majority of my clients being on the autistic spectrum, commonly ranging between 3 and 18 years old. In that short interchange with Prapto a door to a totally new understanding began to open. Our conversation on the warm wet grass that day began a process that is still enlivening, informing and changing my work with my clients. I feel I have only just begun exploring how working with people on the spectrum is an act of collaborative communication – creating something together that enriches all of our lives.

This writing is an attempt to share some of Prapto's teachings and how they have developed in my work. I give examples that convey the application of this unique approach (names have been changed).

The Meeting of Amerta and Autism

Prapto casually and very generously offered to host a session in London where I and others interested in Amerta could move with people on the autistic spectrum. I leapt at this chance and one month later in August 2006 our small group moved with three families (one at a time) in a dance studio in Islington. The afternoon was a deeply touching and nourishing experience for us all, with therapists and teachers being moved and stimulated into interesting questions about their work. The children who joined us seemed to enjoy it too, dancing around with smiles on their faces and not wanting to leave. I was fortunate to be able to do two more workshops in 2006-7 developing this theme with Prapto, and from this moment on there was ever-present cross-pollination between my personal Amerta practice and my work with my clients.

New Meaning to 'Special Needs'

With his unique insight, Prapto frequently reveals the hidden depths of our English language – for example, the term 'special needs'. He posed the question "*how can we find someone's special needs?*" in order to understand and support them better. We all have special needs, unique requirements that enable us to be ourselves and to blossom. Prapto suggested that understanding the special needs of an individual (whether autistic or not) was an important starting place for collaboration and growth.

The 'special need' of 14-year-old Edward emerged quickly at our first meeting. His conversation was quiet, stilted and rarely spontaneous. Hard working and sensitive, he could overcome his

sensory and motor learning challenges with intense focus and manage to speak and, with the support of home tutors, keep up academically with his peers. When under any pressure his face and shoulders would quickly tense. He would hit himself while working and his sleep would be dramatically disrupted if his day had been unsettled.

In free moments he would pace up and down the corridor of their flat or lie on his bed. His favourite activity was brisk walking or roller-skating around his neighbourhood.

He once led his mum and me on a two-hour walk through Paris, determined in his route, and that he would not be persuaded to shorten it. I accepted and treasured this walking, seeing how important it was to his wellbeing. As we walked he answered my questions naturally and spontaneously. His mum was amazed at his sustained conversation. He was normally silent and rarely spoke unless firmly prompted. In those two hours of enjoyment there was more communication and understanding than in the six hours we worked together. The rhythmic movement of the walking was his special need. In it he was calm, and available for interaction.

This leads us to consider the process of how someone finds their own special needs and how we might support this unfolding. Prapto calls this enabling *autistic gardening*.

Collaboration in Autistic Gardening

Exploring this part of his teaching has been fascinating, mysterious and had a huge influence on me. With gentle, persistent nudging from Prapto my emphasis is gradually changing from trying to direct or change the other, to one of “gardening”, where we create the atmosphere or possibility of growth and communication together with a sense of enjoyment. The starting place of gardening is attitude. Rather than being focused on affecting change, the gardening approach trusts that the individual will find their own way, and much like a gardener our goal is to help create the conditions by which the seed can grow. The heart of this approach is communication, understanding and the blossoming of those moving together. An added benefit is that every day it becomes less “work that I am doing” and more of a thoroughly enjoyable way of being with people from which discoveries, learning and nourishment emerges for all present.

With 30 years of experience practicing therapeutic approaches, where it was my job was to address clients’ health issues, changing to

this new way of working has not always been an easy or immediate process. It has been supported by how Prapto has also worked with my family (See Chapter 18 by my partner Una).

Children often don't want to do what you want to them to do. This is very familiar to me with my own children and particularly with my clients on the autistic spectrum who often have hypersensitive senses and are very easily overloaded. As a result they are particular about extra, new or unfamiliar input and find it difficult to respond to a request if it is not following their motivation. My brief from educational authorities and parents is often to help their education, like talking more, dressing themselves, being more attentive or stopping certain behaviours. The question I am then faced with is: how can I introduce a stimulus for learning to someone who finds it difficult to connect with a stimulus that is unfamiliar to them? Recently it seems I have been working with more children that are particularly sensitive and quite resistant to having things done to or for them. Combined with the growing emergence of the gardening approach I am being forced to listen to the special needs of the individual –“what is it they really want?” – and something very different and exciting has been happening.

I have begun to explore following the children's interests and the things that they are exploring already as the main route for their development. During a recent visit to my clinic, Andy, who was seven years old, did a few parts of my assessment protocol but spent most of his time playing with a toy train track which is also his passion at home. He was generally inflexible and had been quite resistant to doing things that his parents think might be good for him.

In his play he was both flummoxed and fascinated by the spatial orientation of objects, for example whether a train would fit into a tunnel or not. I noticed how he was beginning to learn problem solving, and when encouraged and left to find his own solutions he spoke more, became more interactive, more flexible and was growing in confidence. Andy generally played alone. The adults around him tended to try to direct him or to be the problem solvers for him, which as well as removing learning opportunities meant that they remained more distant players in 'adult mode,' rather than really playing with him.

I encouraged his family to find toys that presented him with spatial orientation challenges he could enjoy, starting with train tracks and the constructions around them. Andy also had challenges that related to not being fully aware of his body: neither coordinating

movement efficiently nor having awareness of his body in space, or its position and orientation relative to things around him. This meant he was anxious in busy places, had difficulty sleeping and tended to be clumsy. He really liked strong pressure on his body. This was when he was able to relax most. We played games that followed his themes of interest, some of which involved going in boxes, and pushing him around on a train track, hiding under futons and pressing on him while looking for him, games with crawling under things, swinging and jumping games, and other games to play at home to help body awareness. The immediate effect was that the whole family (including his 10-year-old sister Izzy) enjoyed and fully engaged in the games and activities. With their new understanding the family began to spontaneously discover and create activities in play that stimulated Andy's learning along with everyone else's. The sense of togetherness and enjoyment was striking. Andy started sleeping better. His attention is better, he is calmer and his language continues to expand rapidly. I am continually delightfully surprised how the special needs of my clients emerge during collaborative play and we just need to nourish them.

The Sensory-Motory

Prapto suggested from his observations of my work that if I was to really understand and interact with people on the autistic spectrum I needed to understand and embody what he refers to as the *Sensory-motory*³. It is the integration of the sensory perception and motor systems, which is independent of complex conscious planning and cognitive filtering. Externally it describes a form of movement while internally it is a state of being. It is the foundation of how we experience and relate to the world.

Piaget (1936) first used a similar term to describe the "Sensori-motor developmental stage" from 0-24 months and how the infant relies on seeing, touching, sucking, feeling, and using their senses to learn things about themselves and the environment. He theorised how the early manifestations of intelligence evolve from the interactions of these sensory perceptions and motor activities.

Prapto differs in referring to the *Sensory-motory* as being present in everyday life for everyone regardless of age. He talks about how "*Sensory-motory is movement that has a quality of organism and organization*" or how it has the quality of natural organic processes of the body (organism) and a co-existent quality of structure or

³ Also referred to as Sensory-Motoric.

arrangement (organisation). He teaches us to reconnect to this basic level of our movement and how it “*needs to be placed in or linked with awareness so that human beings existing in movement have the ability of being aware, recognizing and understanding*”. This is the foundation of growth.

People on the autistic spectrum often have issues related to the *Sensory-motory*. Some of them have eloquently described how their sensory perception and its integration with the motor systems is disorganised and can dominate their life experience and daily functioning (Bluestone 2004; Grandin 1996; Higashida 2013; Fleischmann). Perseverative behaviours are common with people on the spectrum, often related to disruption in *Sensory-motory* processing. Behaviours such as rocking, watching light move, making sounds or involvement in particular obsessions can each have many different reasons, such as a response to distracting or overwhelming aspects of the environment, an attempt at self-calming, an exploration of a disorganised perception, or a full body unmediated reaction to emotion, whether anxiety or excitement. The stronger the autistic tendency the stronger the presence of these repetitive, and often rhythmic behaviours and the more the individual appears locked into habitually doing them.

The autistic individual is frequently deeply and intermittently involved in the *Sensory-motory*, sometimes to the extent of being an expert in it, such as reproducing visual images, identifying sounds most people don't hear or mastering complex balancing acts. Prapto talked about how at the same time the “*Sensory-motory*” can be “*not so well connected to awareness of (the person's own) mind*” and there is “*less awareness of outside*” or that they are not so clearly distinguishing between internal experiences related to themselves and those from the outside world. Consequently the learning of planning and our culture of ‘organisation’ can be blocked – such as measuring space and following time or understanding social conventions. This immediately made sense to me, helping me to understand my friends and clients with stronger autistic tendencies and why they often struggled with conventional education systems.

The more relevant idea Prapto suggested is “*how to wake up the Sensory-motory so that it can connect with awareness and planning*”⁴. Or as he was to later say “*how movement can have a quality of organism*

4 During the *Moving with children on the autistic spectrum* workshop, August 2006. Moving Arts Base, London.

having organisation and also organisation having organism".⁵ Here he is describing movement that has two cooperative qualities.⁶ It is the waking up and interaction of these qualities with awareness that can create growth.

When the *Sensory-motory* is not acknowledged, learning for the autistic individual is likely to be stressful. Education in our society favours and fosters a culture of organisation based on organised abstract "thinking" and for many on the autistic spectrum it is so foreign that they find it difficult to engage with. Conventional teaching of things like social skills, academics, or computer skills takes for granted this particular organised way of seeing the world. We need to first understand the *Sensory-motory* before we can effectively support the learning of people on the autistic spectrum. Education of the autistic individual that ignores the innate and instinctive organisation of the *Sensory-motory* is like trying to build a house without awareness of the ground that you are building it on.

Prapto often talks of true 'understanding' as being able to 'under-stand' or get underneath the matter at hand. Aside from being pleasurable, touching the roots of the *Sensory-motory* experience can help intimate what might be behind apparently mysterious repetitive behaviours, perhaps a different way of perceiving the world or the experience of challenges or even pain. This empathy also makes it easier to 'guess' what similar things might be of interest and the possible next steps in their development. This approach makes us like the best friend who knows what is needed. With this attitude and position we are also better placed to offer tools for learning, growth or healing that match the person's needs. In essence this way of experiencing creates more understanding for all concerned; it promotes greater empathy and social interaction, which are often the very things that we are defining as missing for those on the spectrum.

The Baby Sitter Therapist and Waking Up

During those London sessions in 2007 Prapto used a phrase to describe my work that both enlightened and haunts me – *Baby Sitting*. He described how my unconscious and habitual attitude was one

⁵ Conversation with Prapto via SMS October 2013.

⁶ Prapto explains these qualities: "Usually if we say natural movement, it is interpreted as free of structure or form, but actually it is not. Our organism movement in the body has form and structure. Our organism has organisation that is very complex." He also described the quality of "organisation has organism": "Like the structure of our body, every joint has space and fluid so that every joint has a life in its structure and form in our existence." SMS, October 2013.

of looking after my clients in a way that did not stimulate them to grow or *wake up*. It was as if I was subtly focusing on pacifying them, keeping them safe or entertaining them. A crude analogy would be how we might cheer up a baby by making funny faces or putting on the television. He also showed how I put their sense of ease before the authenticity of my own being. I had without realising it become attached to being the nice therapeutic babysitter.

I began to learn how there was an option to stimulate genuine growth and ‘waking up’ rather than doing ‘anaesthetic therapy’. I am still learning about this! Deep set habits like this one are often difficult to change and he encouraged me to play lightly with it and just notice what I was doing. In fact I notice how it is usually a joint habit with both myself doing it and the child willingly receiving it, and how it is remarkably like a play or story that is acting itself out again and again. As I am becoming aware of my part in the play and acting it out more consciously I am able to bring new aspects to my role such as humour, variation of attitude and emotion, pauses and self-reflection. With these qualities it becomes easier to be awake in the “play,” step out of repetition and stimulate something new.

Although wanting the habitual and repetitive, people on the spectrum also respond powerfully to appropriate and authentic interaction. I am reminded of a client, Peter, a gentle and quiet 13-year-old who came to our first London session. He was very sound sensitive, wary of and stressed by new environments, especially if they were noisy and busy. His helper Jan had got lost in traffic and Peter was more stressed than usual. Prapto was singing and playing the drums while some of us ‘warmed up’ ourselves and the room. Peter came to the glass doors and then disappeared with his fingers in his ears. Jan explained that he was finding it too loud and asked Prapto to stop the drums and singing. Peter then drifted into the silent room and we said our hellos. As we began to move Peter joined in by sliding his feet around the room, me chasing him (as requested) and others moving gently in the space. As the atmosphere softened and settled, so too did my nerves at how this meeting would go. A few minutes later my stomach lurched as Prapto began singing and drumming again and very soon at full volume – louder than previously. Didn’t he understand Peter was hypersensitive to sound? What could I do next? My next surprise was that Peter did not attempt to leave the room or stick his fingers in his ears. He seemed to enjoy and respond to the music. This was my first lesson in how hypersensitivities can change instantaneously and dramatically. In this case it was influenced by a

drop in stress. I learnt how the quality and intent behind the ‘noise’ is as important as the volume and pitch.

Peter did the opposite of what I had expected – instead of causing him to withdraw from his environment, the music seemed to wake him up and support him having greater awareness of his surroundings. Prapto later described how with his music he had used trance-like repetition to soothe and to create a sense of ‘common field’ and community in the room. He explained that he hadn’t wanted us to become lost in the trance, so with sporadic changes in rhythm he had helped us be more aware in the trance and to create an overview. Or more simply put he was helping us wake up and step out of our repetition. During my play and work with people on the spectrum I had become familiar with how to create a common field, a sense of resonance or comfort with another, but this was my first experience of consciously stimulating awakening, and expanding another’s awareness.

Happiness as the Source rather than Healing Illness

Prapto has been talking to me for many years about an idea that has been difficult for me to grasp or to implement. But, ironically, the approach of starting from happiness and wellness rather than from illness, dysfunction or suffering is now one of the most exciting for me. Any helping involves enabling what is wanted, what the individuals are good at and what impassions them, as a starting place, rather than starting from what is seen to be missing or what society wants of them. This approach is more restful, playful and enjoyable for me. It is also more engaging for everyone involved. Cooperation frequently has at its base ‘I want you to do my idea’ and revolves around ‘my needs’ being acted on. Children on the autistic spectrum are often viewed as being ‘uncooperative’. But how cooperative are we being with them? Our expectations of them can be very challenging if their ‘hidden’ special needs are not being understood.

Prapto impressed on me how the process of development involves the whole family including the therapist, and that focusing on one person and their problems was somehow limiting their growth and the growth of all concerned. He encouraged an emphasis on sharing and communication.

Sharing time in this way contributes to the mutual understanding and harmony of all involved enabling greater happiness and growth in each person. Something unfolds and is shared that leaves each of

us with an impression that lasts well beyond our time together. It is not just an artistic process, it is art that is enriching lives.

Bringing it All Together

These themes have been evolving since that conversation in Wales seven years ago. They have influenced my work, family and personal life and continue to grow in and with me. Gradually I slide into a way of being where work is pleasurable and growth is for all. Enjoyment and collaboration is becoming the source of growth rather than hard work and effort. I am dazzled by the extraordinariness of life, and the treasure of the individual and the family as it unfolds and reveals itself. I feel honoured to be part of these people's lives, their growth and I am touched by what they share with me. Finally I am part of the garden and I can't help but notice that Prapto has been gardening for me too, stimulating and helping me and my work to blossom.

~ ~ ~

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Sean Williams is fortunate to draw together many important themes in his life into his daily work. He is a HANDLE Instructor and Practitioner which is the main influence of his Neuro-developmental practice. He studied Shiatsu with Sonia Moriceau, and later Seiki with Akinobu Kishi. He practises Play therapy and has been inspired by the Special Time and Son-Rise approaches. He studied Ecology at Edinburgh University. His family, Una Nicholson, Ollie and Vernie have immeasurably enriched his life. He combines all these influences along with Amerta, while helping individuals and groups to reach to their potential.

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