

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 22
'Find Your Position'
Susan Bauer

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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22. “FIND YOUR POSITION”

An Embodied Approach to Movement and Daily Life

Susan Bauer (USA)

Passing a leaf back and forth. It started like this: just as I begin moving forward, I get a feeling to turn back around. I do this slowly, just in time to see the leaf Prapto is handing over to me from behind, as he heads off in the opposite direction. I take the leaf and continue to move on my own. We each move separately, yet with the energy of our leaf between us. Later the leaf is passed back to Prapto in some energetic moment of swiftness that is beyond memory, but now he has it.

When we end we are each on the ground, suddenly together again, in stillness and looking up at the cows on the hill, the leaf now on the floor between us.

After a moment of this stillness, we rise and face each other, and Prapto makes a series of gestures like a prayer before bowing with hands together: “Thank you,” he says to me simply. Yet in this simple bow I learn a great deal.

Prapto has suddenly pulled back, gone deeply and calmly into him-self, as if returning to neutral. Perhaps this is a way to disengage. As I realize this, I feel very American, in the forward and outgoing way of my own bow: simultaneously nodding and smiling my “thank you.”

*Later, as I watch this same ritual at the end of each duet, I see each person tacitly learn this way of bowing from their center.¹
(Bali, Indonesia)*

Through this movement interaction, I was able to experience a deep centered presence in Prapto and, by comparison, reflect on the

1 (Bauer 2005)

presence or absence of this centeredness in myself. While within the dance of passing the leaf I actually felt myself to have had that inner connection – which I believe contributed to the evolving synchronicity of our interaction in the dance – it then became all the more obvious to me when I had ‘lost’ that centeredness when observing my way of bowing. For in that moment, in my enthusiasm to acknowledge and thank Prapto, I began to focus outwardly on him without a simultaneous inner connection within myself. The simple phrase, *find your position*, was one that I heard Prapto use many times in his workshops that seemed to represent a rich, multi-layered perspective on practice which includes this sense of centeredness or inner connection. By *finding our position* we stay grounded within ourselves, while we remain aware of and receptive to our surroundings – and open to the creative possibility of the moment. As I have found to be true in both the practice of Amerta Movement as well as in my own life, two aspects are key to *finding my position*: this type of embodied, centered presence, and the development of a non-judgmental inner witness, which together allow me to arrive more fully in the moment. Further, when I enter the present with openness, I also expand my perceptions – leading to deeper ways of knowing that contribute to the inspiring and often synchronistic flow of life – such as was evident in my leaf dance with Prapto.

Yet while the above journal excerpt marks a moment of insight through an actual interaction with Prapto, my own introduction to Prapto’s movement work in fact began before I had even met him. I had been very moved by an article about Prapto in *Contact Quarterly*², and sensed that his approach was similar in many ways to a form of dance improvisation I had developed years earlier called ‘Moving-from-Within.’ Therefore on my first trip to Bali in 1995 I also traveled to Java, both to visit Borobudur, the famous Buddhist stupa I had longed to see, and to meet Prapto. After visiting Borobudur, I set off with a friend to Solo to find Prapto. When I arrived at his land a Javanese woman informed me that he was not there but was teaching in America! Seeing my disappointment, she suggested that I visit his outdoor practice area and stay as long as I liked. Bordered by a stream, the land is a ‘mosaic’ of many separate sections that Prapto designed – earth mounds, a long walkway, a Catholic grotto, a bamboo hut shaded by trees, a Balinese-style tower, an octagonal paved platform, a grassy square in the sunlight – each meant to

² (Morein 1994)

activate specific energies. At each spot, I stopped to feel the presence of the land, subtly different at each place, and began to dance, while my friend responded as well by playing on the small bamboo flute he'd brought from Bali. We stayed several hours, resting here and there as well. After this experience, I felt relaxed and complete in a way I hadn't expected, especially after not even succeeding in meeting Prapto. And yet, it seemed my sense of Prapto as a kind of 'kindred spirit' had been affirmed – by this place and the attention and intention I felt on his land. It would be another five years, when I was again living in Bali, before I would finally meet Prapto, and begin a fascinating and inspirational journey of working with him and performing together.

During our work in Bali that year, I soon discovered ways in which, as I had sensed, his movement practice shared particular philosophical concepts with that of 'Moving-from-Within.' This validated my path in a deep and inspiring way for, while there are significant differences in the actual form and cultural background of these practices, I recognized a core similarity. Each improvisational movement practice consciously provides a container in which to practice developing greater awareness in both 'our way of moving' and 'our way of being,' by encouraging specific inner attitudes – such as compassion and non-attachment – that are seen as essential to the practice, much as we find in various traditions of spiritual practice.

For instance, in my early work with Prapto he introduced us to the type of presence that emerges from internalizing an inner 'witness,' comparing it to the state of 'pure attention' found in the Buddhist practice of Vipassana meditation. While this pure attention can be present in a stationary practice like sitting meditation, it can also be activated in our dancing, as explained here in this excerpt from a journal I kept while working with Prapto:

Prapto: *"We can have this kind of inner awareness in both the active and in the passive. But, to be a witness, actually, we don't need to be active in there. Like at Borobudur, there are so many Buddha [statues], have you been there? The Buddha is always the witness."*

Then, after a pause: *"Also, our father and our mother, always our witness."*

He looks directly at us now: *"...Then of course we also witness each other... [But then] I can get so caught up in the environment around me that it can be like a trap... I must also witness what's going on in the environment in me."*

And he demonstrates, as if at a party: “*What’s going on, Prapto?*” he says, leaning forward and looking eagerly all around him. We all laugh and nod in agreement.

Then, stopping himself abruptly and sitting squarely, “*Yeah, what’s going on Prapto? You see, then I have to remember to witness for myself. Really to see and be in there.*”

Then simply, “*By this you find your position.*”

“*So you try this with yourself and one other. Two people please come.*” And we begin this practice of finding our position. (Bauer 2005, 16-17)

This type of more embodied sense of *finding one’s position* occurs when I simultaneously become conscious of my own body and open to the present moment. Yet, as Prapto explains – and as I had sensed in my bow with Prapto – often we orient by focusing primarily on the external, rather than the internal, environment.

Exploring this very human dilemma, of how to simultaneously maintain awareness of our internal and external landscape, had actually been my impetus for creating ‘Moving-from-Within’ back in 1987³. As a long-time student of a discipline called Authentic Movement⁴, I yearned to bridge the deep inner-connected movement I experienced in this eyes-closed practice with my ‘eyes-opened’ dancing in a group, community setting – where I felt I experienced many people getting ‘lost’ in a way similar to what Prapto described. In Authentic Movement, ‘movers’ move with eyes closed, in the presence of a skilled ‘witness,’ who sits to the side of the movement space. Movers learn to allow their movement to unfold from within their body, rather than primarily directing it consciously.⁵ After

3 ‘**Moving-from-Within**’ was developed over a ten-year period in collaboration with musician John Sprague, who provided original improvised music for our classes and workshops.

4 This practice was developed by Mary Whitehouse in the 1960s. While Whitehouse is considered the founder of this form, the formal name ‘Authentic Movement’ was later chosen from many that Whitehouse used to describe this process, and formalized into a ‘discipline’ by her student Janet Adler.

5 Mary Whitehouse describes this sense of allowing one’s impulses in this way: “The ego learns slowly an attitude toward what wants moving, not to act while the action is going on. Movement, to be experienced, has to be ‘found’ in the body, not put on like a dress or a coat. There is that in us which has moved from the very beginning; it is that which can liberate us.” (Whitehouse 1963, 53). Janet Adler similarly notes that “with an increasing capacity to concentrate, to listen to impulse, the mover learns to recognize the channel within which the creative or authentic energy flows”(Adler 1987, 156).

moving, the mover speaks with the witness as a means of further understanding the movement experience. Over time, movers learn to internalize the witness presence – much as Prapto has described – such that they can maintain an open awareness while moving.

Drawing on the philosophy and form of Authentic Movement, in 'Moving-from-Within' our movement is similarly self-directed, yet in contrast to Authentic Movement, we move primarily with eyes open – and also with a combination of silence and musical accompaniment – during movement sections or 'dances,' each marked at the beginning and end with the sound of a bell. After the dance has ended, we gather as a group and discuss our experience. I also include guided warm-ups before our dances that serve to enliven our proprioceptive senses and discover our inner source of movement. For instance, a movement exercise I call 'Spiraling Inward' guides participants more deeply into connecting with their authentic impulses for movement, while 'Spiraling Outward' allows them to practice maintaining that inner awareness while entering a duet or small group interaction. These exercises provide an avenue to practice staying centered within oneself, while actively participating in the creative group process. After working with Prapto, in addition to my own descriptions of the practice, I often referred to his example of the enthusiastic 'party-goer' described earlier, as well as his use of the phrase *find your position*, to further emphasize this core goal of the practice. As participants come to discover, with such inner awareness we each gain a deep knowing of where to be, which evolves from moment to moment within the creative process. Thus, rather than 'trying to dance together,' we learn to allow the dance to emerge.

This sense of embodied knowing can also be present in everyday life. For example, I still remember an instance when I had arranged to meet a friend at a local mall, but could not find her when I arrived. I soon realized there had been some confusion as to our meeting place, and began to look for her in places I thought she might be waiting. Eventually, after not finding her I left the mall and was about to walk to my car, when I had a thought: *find your position*. I realized I had been looking for her in the environment around me, yet had never taken a moment to feel where *I was* and where I felt drawn to be. I found myself stopping right where I was, and checking in with my body, found there was actually nowhere to go – no impulse to go to my car, nor to go back in the mall. I became curious about this new way of orienting to my situation and stood still, surrendering all agenda to find my friend and just being present

to the moment. Perhaps a full five minutes had passed when suddenly I found myself turning around to my right, and realized I was then facing the doors of the mall; in a moment my friend emerged from the exit. Listening more deeply, from this centered place that includes my body sense and my inner observer or witness, I *find my position*. I use this practice in many situations: when choosing where to sit on a bus or plane, who to speak to at a conference or dinner party, or when I am ready to enter or leave a dance.

Through connecting deeply with ourselves in this embodied way, I believe we can likewise begin to reference a field that includes, yet is larger than, our individual selves. Javanese culture shares a similar concept in the term *rasa*, which refers to an inner feeling and associated expanded capacity – often considered a spiritual capacity – such that the embodied Javanese self is best understood as a field of forces and potentials, some of which are more bound to the body than others, rather than as an individual entity (Hughes-Freeland 2008, 80). Prapto likewise referred to such an expanded perceptual field in an interview we did together in 2001 in which he described a “*field of expression in art... made up of human, nature, and the light of God as a field.*” He went on to describe how we might access this field of expanded perception:

“[But] when we relax... and connect inside and outside our presence, and have awareness in there and – in awareness – surrender; then we become just aware. And slowly we can grow a presence, still aware, but not being in judgment. Witnessing, but at the same time involving. Because in witnessing, we are also melting, surrendering.”

In this passage, Prapto speaks of the need to develop the type of inner and outer awareness necessary to *find one’s position* – the key to which is surrendering to the moment, while simultaneously keeping one’s inner witness alive. Philosophies of Authentic Movement similarly refer to the importance of “unpremeditated surrender” (Whitehouse 1963, 82), while the witness is often referred to as a compassionate and non-judgmental presence, much as Prapto has articulated above. But what does it really mean to *surrender*, and why is it significant to describe this type of ‘letting go’ as ‘unpremeditated’? As I have found, the quality of surrender necessary ultimately requires that we let go of any attachment to a specific outcome. This includes any pre-conceived or ‘premeditated’ notion of what will transpire, such as in the previous anecdote about being at the mall, or even in the earlier description of my leaf dance with

Prapto. In this way we allow life to unfold, not by giving up action or intention, but by remaining open and receptive to our inner and outer environment in light of our intentions. For example in the mall, while I held an overall intention of reuniting with my friend, in the moment I was not consciously trying to manipulate the situation toward that end. This requires a certain level of trust not always accessible to us, however, such that we can surrender and follow an internal knowing – without being sure where it will lead. It also requires a non-judgmental presence inside that supports, rather than inhibits, our authentic impulses.

For instance, I remember working with a client who was just beginning to get comfortable with the practice of Authentic Movement. She was a young graduate student, busy working two jobs to pay for her studies. After one of our sessions, she reflected that she felt like going home and sitting on the couch with a cup of tea, rather than working on a paper that was due as she had planned. I suggested that she might consider following that impulse, and offered several possible scenarios: perhaps she would sit for a while and then feel rejuvenated and inspired to begin writing; or realize how tired she actually was and go to bed early, yet wake up earlier to write once refreshed from a night's sleep. Or in resting, she might realize she was beginning to get sick, and get the idea to ask for an extension on the paper. This concept that she might actually follow her impulse to rest, trusting that it would ultimately lead her to a workable solution, was just amazing to her – as she had not yet translated the newfound idea of ‘listening to her body’ into her practical, daily living.

Such habitual responses that may inhibit our authentic impulses can be quite strong – such as in this case the conditioned response to push ahead despite fatigue – and may also impact our dancing. For example, in the practice of ‘Moving-from-Within,’ while various qualities of movement emerge over the course of the dance – dances may be celebratory and wild, still and calm, or quite varied in mood from moment to moment – within this freedom, as a dancer I must continuously *find my position*. I may be moving in a way that is quite internal and slow, for instance, when a particularly upbeat, energetic group dance begins to emerge among others in the group. In one instance, I may want to continue with my own movement, but notice an inner judgment that I should join them to ‘be where the action is.’ Or conversely, I might be suddenly drawn out and discover the desire to participate; or perhaps I want to participate, but hesitate as I imagine that I am unwelcome – thus perhaps projecting my own conditioning or judgments onto others. As another example,

I may be involved in an inspiring duet when I realize I am ready to move on, but stay instead for fear of a perceived tacit agreement that we are now ‘dancing together.’ By bringing more conscious awareness to the subtleties of these dynamics within ourselves, such as in our discussions after the ‘Moving-from-Within’ dances, we learn to distinguish between authentic impulses and conditioned responses, between clarity and fear. Rather than being caught in reaction or habit, we can then begin to have more choice in how we respond. While not explicit in Prapto’s model of *finding your position*, I have found that adding this layer of conscious awareness of our conditioned responses further liberates us to move with integrity from a more authentic place. Moreover, when each individual moves from this quality of centered openness, we also collectively invoke the creative inspiration and synchronicity of the interconnected whole.

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, founder of Body-Mind Centering, describes a similar process: “There is this kind of inner ability to yield into emptiness so that something else pops up into the spaciousness and says, ‘This way.’”(2013, 34) Bonnie defines this emptiness – from which inspiration or form emerges as we ‘yield’ – as “generative space”:

“Another word I like is ‘generative.’ There is a generative force that actually takes over... I don’t think it has been identified as a place; I think it is probably space....

Space has consciousness...When we’re inspired and we have this generative power, or when we’re creative, we are in space.

...It’s not like I’ll gradually go from planning... and then going to dancing. No, all of a sudden you are dancing. And it is not a doing process; it’s a practice.” (ibid.)

Likewise, in both Amerta Movement and ‘Moving-from-Within,’ we have the opportunity to practice and create within the generative space. Perhaps it was in fact the generative space of Prapto’s land that allowed me to experience his practice so profoundly on my first trip there, even in his absence; the land and the space held the essence of his practicing there, alone and with others, over so many years. Yet, to achieve an expanded state of awareness such that we can perceive the information within the generative space requires first and foremost that we *find our position* within – a ‘coming home’ to our

own bodies. As Bonnie describes, our dancing thus becomes not a “doing process,” but rather a practice – and I would add, a practice of ‘being.’ And from this state of beingness – such as in the heightened spiritual capacity of *rasa* – we expand our perceptual base to include the ‘generative space’ around us.

Such an understanding of what it means to become present and *find one’s position* is in fact becoming increasingly relevant and essential in today’s fast-paced, technology-obsessed world. Even in small moments of ‘down time,’ rather than pause to reconnect with ourselves, many people reach for their cell phones or iPads; or, when walking, keep their heads down to attend to their technology in hand. Chances for even momentary ‘spontaneous’ inner connection, much less moments of intentional conscious awareness, thus increasingly elude us. Simultaneously, we may also miss a moment to view the trees as we pass by, the clear blue sky above, or the eyes of a stranger crossing our path.

Yet these potential moments of awareness live inside and around us, within and without – but they require our attention. They require that we wake up and consider our relationship to self and other, inner and outer awareness, in the ongoing practice of living. In this way we take our position, and allow each person the freedom to do the same, as we live with presence and awareness. I have used Prapto’s phrase *find your position* to help remind myself, my students and my clients of this intimate interrelationship of mover and witness, self and other, individual and community. Like a compass, it draws us into ourselves while maintaining an openness to life that invites the fullest breath of life – inspiring greater creativity and grace in our dancing and in our lives.

Afterword

After leaving Bali, it was another 10 years before I saw Prapto again⁶, when in 2011 an opportunity arose to work with him in a workshop in Berkeley, CA where I had been living. After the first morning of movement practice together, but not yet having spoken a word, we found ourselves outside during a break. He paused and was just looking at me. “What is it Prapto?,” I finally asked, as I sensed he was perceiving something. *“Ahhh, you’re very busy, so many projects, Susan!”*

6 Immediately upon arriving back in the US in 2001, however, I did do a final workshop with Prapto at Naropa University. Coincidentally, he was teaching a workshop called *Remembering in America* that same month, which seemed a perfect way to ‘re-member’ upon my return from my year abroad.

This was very true; in fact I had planned to come only to that one day out of a five-day workshop as I just couldn't fit it in. "But now," he added slowly, "ahhhh, now – more *being in the doing*." As I took this in, I realized that this was also quite true. While I did have many responsibilities, I was not feeling overwhelmed by them, but rather was inspired and present in a deeper way in many areas of my life. "Yes, so it's good, very good" he remarked. I was so very thankful that he had brought this to my attention, as I became aware of how much had changed since I had first worked with him, and how important it has been to integrate this idea of *finding my position* into my daily life.

~ ~ ~

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Susan Bauer, (MFA, MA, RSME/T) is a dance/somatics educator who has taught in college and community settings in the US and Asia over the past 30 years. Her work is informed by her extensive background in dance, Authentic Movement, and Body-Mind Centering, as well as dance anthropology and cultural studies. She serves as Adjunct Professor at the University of San Francisco, and has a private practice in the SF Bay area as a Registered Somatic Movement Educator/Therapist. Susan is also a Fulbright Scholar to Bali, Indonesia, where she has studied Balinese dance, mask-making, and ritual since 1995.

www.susanbauer.com

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