

# 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 23***

***Body Body***

**Helen Poynor**

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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## 23. “BODY BODY”

### A Movement Practitioner’s Journey with Amerta Movement

Helen Poynor (UK)

My point of entry to Prapto’s work is movement itself. My understanding and my application of the work are from the perspective of a movement practitioner, which includes my practice as a teacher, artist and movement therapist. I run the ‘Walk of Life’ Workshop and Training Programme in non-stylised and environmental movement.

My intention here is to trace the influence of Prapto’s work on the continuing evolution of my approach to non-stylised and environmental movement. This includes my integration and interpretation of the work as a Western feminist and the interweaving of the Eastern and Western lineages of Prapto and Anna Halprin with whom I had trained at the San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop/Tamalpa Institute.

I will reference the early stages of Prapto’s work with Westerners, specifically his notion of *Body Body*, which was central to his teaching at that time and which provides the ground for this chapter.

I first encountered Prapto’s work as an established movement practitioner in the mid 1980s. My background included training in theatre, dance and body-orientated psychotherapy. I attended one of his earliest workshops in Europe in Hamburg in 1985. Prapto said very little, his command of English was limited, the movement tasks were simple and repetitive consisting for several days primarily of ongoing instructions: to walk, crawl or move in lying, to stop, to go on; together with a hands-on exercise in pairs and an invitation to move alone, in twos or small groups in front of

the group. It also included sitting relaxation that I later understood to resemble Sumarah Meditation.<sup>1</sup> Despite the apparent simplicity of the instructions the quality of the movement work in a group, which included beginners as well as experienced movers, was exceptional. I was fascinated and could not fathom how such basic tasks and instructions could facilitate such a depth of practice.

I joined the first organised group of ten Westerners to work with Prapto in Java in 1986. This group was initiated and supported by a small group of colleagues who had travelled to Java to work with Prapto before he began offering formal courses or workshops and who also introduced his work to Europe. Three of them, Christine Stelzer, Susanne Christmann and Christian Böhringer, had previously trained in movement with Anna Halprin. So from the outset, in this generation of practitioners at least, there was an implicit inter-relationship between these two lineages of movement practice.

After years of exploring ‘free movement’ alone in a variety of locations in Java, Prapto developed his work initially on and with these four Europeans<sup>2</sup>. Through his work with them and the first group of ten he began developing his understanding of Westerners and the significant cultural difference between Western and Javanese culture that needed to be bridged in order to communicate and embody his approach to movement. Everyone involved was taking a leap of faith into uncharted waters since Prapto was barely known at the time and his work was in the early stages of its evolution. The participants were far removed from familiar surroundings, many at turning points in their lives, disrupted enough from habits and comfort zones to be available to new and life-changing experiences: willing raw material in what was effectively a creative movement and cultural laboratory.

At that point in my professional development I had stopped teaching in order to focus on my creative work. In addition to having opened to change in my professional life I found myself unexpectedly in a period of complete personal upheaval. I had a sense that my

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1 Sumarah is a Javanese form of meditation based on surrender. It had a significant influence on the evolution of Prapto’s practice and his students were encouraged to attend the regular Sumarah sessions offered in Solo by Pak Wando, a Sumarah *pamong* (guide).

2 José Mulder van de Graaf later joined the initial group of three. Prior to working with this small group, Prapto had been working in Java with Christine Rod from Switzerland.

work as a movement facilitator, while successful, had outstripped my conscious knowledge. I had an image of needing either a guardian angel or 'something' in my back. The work with Prapto filled this need.

The experience of working in Java was all the more intense because most of the teaching was not mediated by language. I experienced and understood the work, kinaesthetically, directly through my body. I could make little sense of it conceptually and would have been unable to communicate it in words. This way of learning suits me, circumventing the distancing effects of an overactive mind and connecting me to the source of my being. I need to move to understand myself and the world around me. At that point in my life I needed more than ever to ground myself in my body. Prapto's phrase *Body Body* sums up the tenor of his teaching at this time. In Indonesian, repeating a word serves to emphasise it or render it plural. The work was intensely physical, emphasising the contact of the feet on the floor and the movement of the body through space. We were invited again and again to land in the physical body, not to resist or fly away from embodiment. It was challenging and touched, at different moments, unexpected layers of both exhaustion and vitality and deep wells of emotion. Whatever was stirring we were encouraged to walk, to feel our feet on the ground, embodying a robust physicality. This offered an effective alternative when overwhelmed with emotion and contrasted with the prevalent practice of the Human Potential Movement in the 1970s which encouraged cathartic expression of emotion, fostering the belief that the only way out was through. The work with Prapto stripped back my movement patterns to repair cracks in the foundations that I had long avoided and had become adept at circumventing in my movement practice. It both brought me back to myself and moved me on. I had the image of a horse-shoe held in a red hot furnace and being re-shaped.

The only way of digesting and integrating my experiences after returning from Java was through movement. Just as my kinaesthetic being had received the teaching without the mediation of language or conceptual thought, so I digested the work kinaesthetically. Daily movement practice was less a question of self-discipline than of necessity. I *needed* to move. My kinaesthetic self was definitely running the show. I remember vividly a period when all my movement sessions were spent crawling. Each day I determined to do something different but on entering the movement space I

would immediately find myself on all fours and would spend an hour crawling relentlessly. My 'animal body' knew what it needed and having been invited to come to the fore would brook no contradiction; I could not stop until it had been satisfied. I wondered subsequently if this was a process of my body filling in gaps in my movement development, returning to stages which had perhaps been passed through too rapidly, repeating particular movements just as a young child does as it learns to roll, sit, crawl, stand and eventually walk. There was certainly no question of moving on two feet during the crawling period!

When I eventually resumed teaching movement, after a further period of training in Java, ongoing intensive personal practice and working with Prapto in Europe and the UK, several conundrums presented themselves. There were challenges of both translation and of integration. Bridges needed to be built. Since I still had a primarily kinaesthetic rather than a conceptual grasp of the material I could not explain the work and needed to find a way of communicating it using language in a Western context. I was acutely aware of the chasm between myself as a Western feminist and Prapto as a Javanese man. For me there was a need for a double cultural shift in my communication and presentation of this approach to movement, not only from East to West but also from a patriarchal to a feminist approach<sup>3</sup>. In addition, my teaching style is consciously uncharismatic which is a reflection of both my personality and my politics. The obvious solution was to teach experientially since this is a characteristic of Prapto's work and mirrors my own approach to learning. I discovered how to apply the work in my own teaching by teaching it.

For approximately the next two years I needed to focus my attention almost exclusively on my experience of the work with Prapto. My previous work and training was temporarily unavailable as I integrated this new approach and material, and explored ways to work with it with others. One of the biggest shifts was away from the imaginative work and personal mythology which is at the core of the Halprin Life/Art process<sup>4</sup>. For some years, while connecting to my physical body at another, less conscious, level, I seemed to lose touch with my imagination. I no longer experienced images or narrative as I moved. I was all body. In time, images began to

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<sup>3</sup> I have written in detail (1998) about the relationship between feminism and my approach to movement practice.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Anna Halprin's approach, see Worth & Poynor (2004).

return but I experienced them differently; they began to flow in and through my movement without becoming primary. By continuing to follow the body rather than the image, the image does not limit the movement or become fixed, it changes as the movement evolves in a process of embodied imagination. When applied to creating performance this contributes to an experience that I can only describe as akin to 'channelling'. Language is a blunt instrument with which to capture the subtlety and immediacy of the experience I am attempting to describe in which an image or a character manifests directly in the moving body without the mediation of conscious thought. For example when preparing a solo performance for Prapto's Sharing Time Festival of Ritual Theatre and Cultural Environment (Java 1995) images of birthing and the death of a child arose directly in my movement rather than emerging first in my conscious mind or imagination. This led to the creation of a ritual performance dedicated to all women who had ever lost a child, a theme which I hadn't envisaged and which surprised me.

The work with Prapto coupled with my training with Anna Halprin interweave to form a dual lineage which underpins the evolution of my own approach to movement teaching and practice over the past 30 years, differentiating it from other more conventional approaches to dance and theatre which I have studied. In many ways my teaching approach is different in form from how I received the work in Java. I teach by offering movement scores and tasks such as moving at different levels but only occasionally enter the space to move with people, preferring to witness and offer guidance and support, usually in words but sometimes through movement and voice, from the periphery. Although I may participate in an introductory score in a workshop to support the energy in the room, I rarely guide participants by moving with them. There are a number of reasons for this personal preference which has evolved naturally in my teaching practice. I feel one has to be very clear to be conscious enough in the moment to guide people by moving with them, which I understand as a form of teaching through transmission<sup>5</sup>. Personally I need the time that witnessing provides to recognise my own condition and 'check' my responses when I am

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5 I am using the term transmission loosely to refer to spiritual practices in which experience/insight is transmitted directly from teacher to student. A related practice exists in Sumarah meditation where the *pamong* (guide) 'checks' another's condition by opening to receive/experience it in themselves thus enabling them to support the evolution of the other's meditation and life practice.

guiding others. This personal practice lies at the core of my teaching and despite the apparent difference in form directly reflects my experience of working with Prapto in Java in which, alongside the physicality of the work, there was a recurrent emphasis on 'attitude'. I understand this in the context of Prapto's Buddhism and Sumarah meditation as a practice of continual and profound self-awareness.

In individual movement therapy I choose not to enter the space, offering the mover the experience of their own space to move in (or not) in any way they choose. My intention is to support them to find their own way by offering an attentive, non-judgemental and non-intrusive presence. This approach reflects a person-centred, feminist and somatic approach to movement therapy which is deeply imbued with all I have received from Prapto.

The term non-stylised specifically indicates a desire to move away from preset movement/dance vocabularies which are taught through imitation. It also reflects the intention for each individual to discover their own way of moving. This ultimately becomes their own style which ideally remains in a state of constant evolution. When leading workshops I avoid demonstrating a movement task (unless it feels necessary or particularly helpful) in order not to encourage people to copy what they see or to create an atmosphere where 'getting it right' becomes paramount. The landscapes of different bodies shaped by different life experiences need to find their own expression in movement. Witnessing people move I perceive them coming into focus as they become more aligned with themselves, embodying their individuality and allowing others to see them more clearly. This is fundamentally different from other approaches to movement or performance that stress the need to continually generate creative material in a search for originality. Since we are all unique there is no need for this excavation of new ideas or vocabulary.

There is nevertheless a contradiction in teaching a kinaesthetic approach to movement through language and verbal scores. Language alerts our mental processes; if as we start to move we get lost in the labyrinth of our minds or seduced by our analytic understanding, we are likely to find ourselves further away from our kinaesthetic experience than ever. There is a sort of sleight of hand (or mind) that allows verbal scores to be received and mentally released, held lightly and intuitively, allowing them to filter through as our kinaesthetic self finds its way. This is at odds with educational practices that emphasise analysis and conceptual understanding. Prapto circumvents this by his maverick and poetic use of the

English language, a freedom which is perhaps easier to access as a non-native speaker.

In a synthesis of the kinaesthetic training that underpins Anna Halprin's approach and immersion in Prapto's practice of *Body Body*, the 'Walk of Life' approach uses scores based on the structure of the body, with an emphasis on the skeleton, that offer physical tasks. For example, starting from walking, working through the skeleton from the feet up gradually incorporating more of the body's structure, emphasising the interconnection and flow of movement through the whole body. The starting point is the body itself rather than a concept, theme or image. From my perspective there is a tendency for these mental functions to elicit a cerebral response that is enacted by body rather than arising directly from it. This may result in a gap, however slight, between stimulus and expression. Paradoxically this emphasis on the body as experienced in Anna Halprin's, Prapto's and my own work has the potential to liberate

both personal and creative process.

In the context of movement in the environment, the emphasis on the body supports an embodied encounter with the land, a direct engagement of the physicality of the body with the materiality of the land in a receptive and responsive relationship. The scores offered provide



Photo: Annie Pfingst

a springboard and direction but the environment itself becomes the teacher with different elements eliciting different experiences and movement responses. Moving among trees may offer a clearer kinaesthetic understanding of one's verticality. Lying in tussocky grass cradled by the contours of the earth can engender a profound experience of being held and of surrender. Working in tidal environments and in different weathers offers an experience of change mirroring the changes in our interior landscape and our personal weather. Moving on the coast where I live, the constant movement of the sea combined with the clear form of the rocks supports the ability to move with clarity and fluidity – challenging us to embody both our strength and our responsiveness. The intricate microcosm of rock-pools viewed at eye level coupled with the grandeur of the cliffs offers a perspective of our place in the interconnected web of life.

Working with movement in a non-stylised and holistic way inevitably touches the emotions. To what extent and how directly a facilitator of non-stylised movement engages with emotion depends on their intention and training together with their personal perspective on, and sense of ease around, feelings. It may also vary in different contexts and with different participants. For me the body remains central when working with feelings. While some psychological methods and spiritual traditions highlight the relationship between the mind and the emotions, other therapeutic approaches, including Bio-dynamic Psychology (Gerda Boyesen's neo-Reichian approach to body therapy) in which I trained, emphasise the relationship between the emotions and the body: emotions are understood to be embedded in the body. While it is clear that changing one's attitude can result in a change of heart, from this perspective in-depth transformation also necessarily permeates our physical being. The relationship between moving and feeling is a two-way street. Anna Halprin asserts that as well as expressing your feelings by moving you can change how you feel by how you move. Moving may open the door to feelings, associations and images, the body is both the conduit and container for these. Content is elicited by the moving body which also provides the ground to process this material. By continuing to follow the body as feelings arise, they are potentially transformed, understood and integrated from a new perspective. In some respects the different Western and Eastern approaches of Anna Halprin and Prapto mirror

each other in relation to the potentially transformative power of movement on our emotions.

There is a recurrent dilemma about how to understand the role of the mind in movement practice. This has been touched on briefly in relation to using verbal instructions in movement teaching and the references to the imagination. It merits a much longer discussion than can be encompassed in this chapter but I would like to offer a few further reflections here. I would suggest that the predominant function of the mind in movement practice is one of awareness rather than of description, the creation of narrative or analysis. The mind becomes an ally focusing our attention on what we are doing, on our body and where we are, rather than a distracting obstacle to be overcome. If one is fully absorbed in the physical practice of *Body Body*, there is no space to simultaneously analyse the process and thus put it at one remove. One may choose to reflect on it subsequently. There is a parallel between movement practice and the experience in meditation when the mind is empty and one simply inhabits the present moment, a sense of one's whole being (body, mind and feelings) being aligned, whether in movement or in stillness.

A more paradoxical experience of the mind in movement practice may also be echoed in meditation: through an embodied experience of moving, it is possible to calm the overactive quality of thinking which for many of us resembles a hamster on a wheel. This clears the path for inspiration or clear thought to arise and is more likely to happen if we are not focusing on a problem or dilemma in an attempt to solve it but are immersed in the movement itself. This creates the receptivity that allows something new to emerge whether we see the source of it as the inner guide of Sumarah, our subconscious mind or Life/God. The catalyst for the realisation is the moving body.

In conclusion, the practice of *Body Body* is of value to all who work with movement artistically, personally or therapeutically. The moving body is the foundation, the pathway and the means of expression. *Body Body* is an approach to movement practice which, through focusing on the physical, allows the whole being to ground itself in the walk of life.

Rahayu. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rahayu is the expression used to mark the end of a Sumarah meditation session. It means peace, harmony, and for me it always elicits a sense of gratitude.

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