

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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OPEN ACCESS

Chapter 28

Re-Membering Butterfly Beach

Melinda Buckwalter

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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28. “RE-MEMBERING” BUTTERFLY BEACH

Melinda Buckwalter (USA)

Memory

Butterfly Beach – I happened on it while riding my bicycle around Santa Barbara, California, during a vacation. I was visiting my best friend who had just moved there; this was back in the 1980s. I remembered it for years as the perfect beach. I had come upon it at the end of my stay so I didn't have time to go back, but I marked it in my memory. Shady, there was a wall, a descent, not much beach. Was it high tide? Heavenly swim. That sip had potency. Meanwhile, my friend moved to the mountains, and Butterfly Beach entered my dreamscape, enhancing its status. Then began the long slide, from consciousness to sunken treasure. And there it lay.

Words

I am a dance writer with a curiosity for making dances out of improvised movement, a practice sometimes referred to in the US as compositional improvisation. I noticed that several artists had developed unique ways of going about it. I decided to study with them; maybe I would learn something about making my own dances! In this process, it seemed natural to keep a journal. Then, a friend asked me if I would write a book on the topic. I was fascinated by what I had read about Indonesian dance maker Prapto and his Amerta Movement, and I wanted to include his work in my book. So, in 2005, I sent a passage of my dance writing, a chapter on Amerta Movement, to him for review. I had some trepidation about what he might think of it, since I hadn't actually experienced his work. Were my hunches on target? Prapto and Diane Butler, a dance scholar and

native English speaker, looked at my writing. They sent brochures, context pieces, and explanatory emails.

In our editorial process, there were issues regarding tenses. Prapto preferred possibility and ongoing present – “*if feeling flying, be embodied;*” I translated into time-based, dependent clauses – “while having the feeling of flying, remain embodied.” I would try to make some sense of their wording and then I would send back a reworked section. Sometimes my suggestions were accepted, but in a few persistent places Prapto and Diane would not shift. I was afraid the writing wouldn’t make it by my editor. What to do? I decided to quote Prapto’s material as is. The quotes had enough context to give a gist of what was meant to an English speaker, and more importantly, to give the particular flavor of the way Prapto uses language. Our exchanges intrigued me and piqued my curiosity for study in person with Prapto.

Practice

My first opportunity to study with Prapto was at *The Prayer of the Butterfly*, a workshop in the woods of Western Massachusetts. From my notes on the workshop:

*Adapt to language of wind, finding place where wind doesn’t blow
you, like butterfly, how may find the land of wind?*

I remember Prapto pointing to two butterflies in the orchard – playing, dancing with one another, sparring as they do mid-flight, flickering like shadows and light make dapples under a tree when the wind blows. “*Like that – find the land of the wind.*”

In the workshop there was a lot of angst among the ten or so of us from around the globe about finding our right place in the world, our home, where to live, how to live. We were all vagabond dancers, either mid-vagabond, wondering ‘what next?’ or post-vagabond, wondering how to deal with the stationary world in which we found ourselves. Kerplunk. With Prapto dancing, singing, or drumming along with us, we practiced anchoring, coming and going, and staying in relationship. He adapted his work to our situation and context. It made perfect sense.

Toward the end of this workshop, Prapto told us about a nun he had encountered while teaching and how, in her spiritual practice, she was very seriously striving for connection with God. From Prapto’s perspective, her striving for was an obstacle and kept her from *being with*. An attitude of striving positioned one’s God out of reach. This

need for a switch of perspective, of tense if you will, in order to be with made sense to me. It was along the same lines of perspective-switching that we practiced in our dancing. For example, in one exercise we used our arms and legs as frames to look through, as if looking through various windows of a house. Prapto explained that in doing so we cleaned the windows of our perception; we became more fluid in shifting between sensory modes and from internal to external impulses. In the case of the nun, Prapto spoke of a shift from vertical – living in a time-sequenced progression, to horizontal – an expansive, continuous present kind of place. Sometimes I felt this place when we danced under Prapto’s direction. How to find it on my own?

I asked Prapto how we might continue to practice once the workshop was over. He gave me two suggestions. One was to *re-member* how we worked. I understood this to mean that I should not copy exercises by rote or recreate the experience of them as they had happened, but rather that I should reconstruct them from my present circumstance. The second was a pointing exercise. He asked me to “*Please try.*” When Prapto asked for a physical reply in response to a question, I found it unusually difficult to focus. However, I did my best. In this case, I was to point with my finger and name what I pointed to – simple enough. I squirmed a bit under the microscope, but demonstrated to Prapto’s satisfaction. I was happy to have something to work on.

Semaphore

In Steve Paxton’s workshop, *Material for the Spine*, we learned to point with other parts of our body – our sitz bone could point to our heel. Internal pointing led to external shaping of the body and this work gave volume to my pointing practice. Steve had recently read that pointing had been identified as an evolutionary step toward language. Evidently, being able to point at snakes, to warn and be warned not to step on them, was a survival tactic that led to more advanced modes of communication. If dance is a universal language, then pointing is its Morse code.

In Daniel Lepkoff’s workshop, *Making and Seeing Dance*, we worked with bamboo poles. The long sticks served as extended pointers. Their heft helped inform me about the physical and multisensory effort involved in pointing. While the forces at play in wielding a fingertip are minimal and so familiar as to go unnoticed,

the unwieldy poles magnified the act of pointing – the time, energy, and muscularity of it – and brought it into conscious awareness. Daniel asked us to notice the objects of our environment. As we pointed and measured with our poles, we inserted ourselves through movement into the composition of the room. Our poles, pointing from one object to another, became magicians' wands with which we conjured space and time into being. Through this expanded pointing, I experienced how my body actively interprets my surrounding environment and brings life to it by adding dimension.

I made an outdoor performance called *West Halifax Study No. 5* to work on my pointing practice. I enjoyed pointing to obvious things in the immediate vicinity and naming them, then I mixed them with things that were minute like ants, or inside me like my liver, or very far away, whose locations I had to guess at. I enjoyed how it played with the imagination of the audience, sending them on an instantaneous field trip of macrocosmic or microcosmic proportion. I finally had an 'ah ha' moment – I realized that in pointing I was actually locating myself. I used not only vision but also proprioceptive senses to point; there was a felt component in the act. I was locating, remembering myself in space through the external. How else to know where I am?

Blossoming

In October 2011, I flew once again to Santa Barbara after twenty-odd years, this time to study with Prapto. We met daily in a Unitarian Church and a public park across the street. We practiced *stopping in not moving*, *stopping in no moving*, and *stopping in moving*. Ducks were our mentors. We practiced with them on a little island in their pond at the park. Stopping in not moving was when they slept, beak tucked under wing, oblivious. Stopping in no moving was their habitual paddle – lazing about, nibbling at the water, and throwing in a preen. Stopping in moving was when they took off after something, a rival duck or proffered breadcrumbs, darting with single-mindedness. This one-pointed focus during the duck's dart created the stopping effect. Even though they were moving at top speed, they kept an unwavering attention on the object of their dart that translated into a kind of stillness. We observed, then practiced. I often got it backwards. Nevertheless, I practiced something, blindly, somehow finding my faith in the process.

Later, we moved on to *not leaving*. In not leaving, we worked indoors with chairs. We sat in and moved in and around our chairs, but never left them. Even if we stood up to shift position, our attention was to stay focused on the chair. The chair was our anchor. This is a difficult practice for busy Americans, always on the run. Prapto mimicked, to hilarious effect, how we move from one thing to another with our minds already on the next spot – where we are going to be rather than in the transit.

In a development of the exercise, one person sat in the chair, not leaving, and another person moved around them, not leaving. Prapto explained that the person in the chair was more of the flora variety and the person moving was more of the fauna variety. This exercise makes excellent couples therapy! Prapto and Diane did a fabulous duet-lecture-demonstration, including dialogue from their personal relationship. Prapto tiptoeing, strayed a bit far from the chair and Diane, perfectly timed, harrumphed that she would rather stay home and take care of herself, thank you very much. We explored our own comfort zones, just how far could we push the envelope before it felt like we had left our companion-in-chair? Were we more flora, a rooted homebody? Or more fauna, enjoying a bit of independence now and then?

Before we knew it, we were *Being Blossoming*, the name of the workshop and pun on the name of the organizer, Katya Bloom. Prapto brought us into the courtyard and explained the lotus sutra (a lesson on immortality which many consider to be the Buddha's final teaching) to us as we gathered around the orange daylilies in various stages of bloom. In order to be blossoming, we used the practice of not leaving in order to stay inside the lily bud where we would *show our face*, rather than buzz around outside the flower – bizzy, busy, buzzy, buggy mind. In *The Prayer of the Butterfly* workshop, there had been many sitting sessions. In this workshop there was just this one, adapted from the lotus sutra for present-day Santa Barbara Unitarian Church purposes. Simple ingredients: we re-membered and relocated the sutra from our multi-voiced perspectives, a gathering of ducks. The result: we did blossom!

Our blooming was somehow accomplished through all of our moving practices – our moving had secretly been informing us. When it came time to sit, we just knew what to do. We were outwardly sitting, but inwardly (is it really inward?) we were showing our face, basking in our blossoming, finding our stopping.

I wish I could explain the movement that we do so that it could be pictured. That is how I have been taught to write about dance, ‘Please paint me a picture.’ All I can remember is that when Prapto asked, “*Please come,*” I just moved, and if I didn’t start just moving, I wouldn’t be able to find it. It is the exact opposite of many improvisation classes I have taken. In these I am told, “Don’t noodle around! Make a phrase! Learn to be still! Learn when to exit!”

Come to think of it now, in Prapto’s work we do have our stoppings, so it’s not like we are noodling. Our stoppings help us. Prapto says composing while dancing is recognizing ourselves in the dancing. “*Find your stoppings,*” he reminds us, “*then you can recognize your composition.*”

At first, it is hard for me to trust the moving that Prapto asks of us. “*Please come,*” he says, which means come here and start moving. I don’t mean that it’s hard to begin just moving around. It’s not! It’s just that I’ve been trained to want something more, to look for something. Prapto asks me to stop looking for something else, to stop leaving the dance. As I drift from words to workshops – alighting, flitting, and re-mem-bering – I am slowly learning to trust those invisible currents that the butterfly calls home, the land of the wind.

I could say something about the way the movement feels. On watching it, it feels silvery, like a thread, like the weaving of a web, a quicksilver web. In dancing, it feels like entering a slipstream of movement that is always almost right here, being woven just beyond normal, if I could only catch it. Then I do. I find myself moving and I forget that I ever needed something more.

Seraphim

My last day of *Being Blossoming* was beach day. Prapto often works on the beach at his home in Java and in Bali. How lucky to have the opportunity to do that work with him here in the US! We carpooled and arrived at the beach in the afternoon, squeezed into the last few parking spots we could find, and clambered down the stairs onto the beach. It’s Butterfly Beach! My memory returns – the perfect beach, and here with Prapto to do his amazing yet ordinary work.

We immediately ran to the water’s edge, dipping our toes, making overtures to the waves to let us in, like little kids on holiday. Prapto admonished us not to lose ourselves. He then showed us how to find the horizon and to find ourselves *in relation*. Our dances that

day were a way to find our *human measurement* amid this infinite backdrop. We danced in duos and trios, in and out of the water, on and in the sand. “*Please come,*” Prapto said, over and over. I struggled and flagged in the hot sun, grit, and beach gnats. What was I doing? I would find some strand of a dance to hang onto, only to have it drift away. The tide shifted around us. I felt a familiar sense of being lost, at sea in my improvisations.

Finally, as the sun set, I made my goodbyes to the group; I was too tired to register sadness at my departure. The next morning, as I sat in a brief predawn meditation before a full day of flying, I felt, quite unexpectedly, the ocean moving. It was a physical echo, like a sailor experiencing land sickness. Slurping, slapping, rocking, laughing, washing. I was feeling myself in relation to the ocean, and for a moment, in my stopping, it made perfect sense: the endless movement, the ducks and butterflies, the coming and going, the not leaving. In measuring myself against the ocean, in pointing to that vastness, I had been reflected back. In that moment, I recognized my self – ever changing yet always right here. And then, an ocean of activity swallowed me as it does every day. But for that moment of stopping, I could feel its gentle caress: I am here, I am here, I am still here. What a treasure!

~ ~ ~

Melinda Buckwalter is a writer and researcher, the author of *Composing While Dancing: An Improviser’s Companion* and has been co-editor of *Contact Quarterly*, the dance and improvisation journal, since 2005.

She studied dance at Bennington College where she received her MFA and teaches anatomy and kinesiology at Wesleyan University. Currently she works for the Five College Center for East Asian Studies at Smith College in Northampton, MA, and continues to develop a constellation of interests in Asia, including practice in Qigong, Jin Shin Jyutsu, and yoga.

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