

# 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 3***

***Cultural Aspects of the Movement Work***

**Christina Stelzer**

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

Taken from the book *Embodied Lives*,  
published by:

Triarchy Press  
Axminster  
UK

[info@triarchypress.net](mailto:info@triarchypress.net)

[www.triarchypress.net](http://www.triarchypress.net)

First published in 2014.

Second edition published in 2025.

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-909470-32-3

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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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### 3. CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE MOVEMENT WORK

Christina Stelzer (Germany)

Living on the island of Java for three years from 1985 to 1988 and experimenting together with Prapto in a culture and environment quite different in many ways to my European background, marked a turning point in my life. Although I came back to the West, I never came back to seeing the world the way I had seen it before. That is why it seems to me essential to shed some light on the cultural context in which the movement practice that Prapto named Joged Amerta – and that others have brought into the world with their own names – is rooted. Rather than writing about applying the principles of this movement approach to my practice and teaching, I would like to take you into the atmosphere of an island whose people by their very nature had a fundamental impact on my future life and work.

Java is an island with a tropical climate, where the warmth in the air has a soothing quality at night, and where the daytime heat can immobilize you for most of the afternoon. Living in Java meant not only living in weather conditions quite unlike those I had grown up with but, moreover, it meant living with people who have another relationship altogether to time and space. The ways of relating to each other that I encountered are determined by an awareness rooted in qualities of “right timing” rather than following the clock, and by a very refined sense of atmospheres.

The daily exposure to this very different way of life for such a length of time had a tremendous influence on me, but one that is hard to describe. It all took place in the context of a movement practice that was in the process of emerging, where concepts and structures to work within were minimal. Looking back to this time, there are three cultural aspects I would like to highlight. These aspects are: **waiting, hearing the world** and **respect**.

## Waiting

This is a state of being that I call 'waiting' for lack of a more appropriate term.

To me it felt like a quarter of my time in Java was spent waiting. Waiting was part of daily life and living: waiting for transport, waiting impatiently in the immigration office, waiting for Prapto to come, waiting for the monsoon rain to stop, waiting in long lines at the post office, waiting for a dance performance to begin, waiting for the heat to pass to be able to leave the house... And it did not mean just a few minutes; no, often it meant hours. It was so fundamental and had gone so deep under my skin, becoming a state of being rather than a waiting for something, that in the end it was not seen as waiting any more; it became an attitude of relaxing deeply into the situation and giving in.

Things will just not work for you in Javanese culture if you cannot arrive at this inner place of surrender. It is difficult in the beginning for the Western attitude of wanting things our way, and not only our way but right away! We are confronted by our restlessness, our impatience and our concepts of efficiency. Yet when we can give in to the moment and let go, we experience the world from a different point of view. Doors open towards sensing the way in which Javanese people are receiving their environment and each other.

In the West we are commonly very forward-oriented. The planning and following of set schedules dominates our lives. Living in the Javanese culture and moving with Prapto, I began to experience a rhythm that was of a quite different melody.

We often went with Prapto to a place near Wonogiri, a hilly area where Prapto had built a small temple. We practiced there in this beautiful natural environment, surrounded by rice fields and a mountain range and with a view to a lake. There was always this 'arriving', which meant a settling into the place. Prapto would speak a few words with the caretakers of the place, we would look for the mats and spread them, and later the caretakers brought tea. Prapto would come and sit with us, smoking a cigarette. Time to watch butterflies dancing, to listen to the insects and the soft rattling of bamboo. Nothing much happening, it seemed. When do we begin?

Actually, it had already begun. What was happening was already part of the movement process, its opening moment. Opening to more than oneself.

It was a moment of connecting; connecting to one's own state of being as well as to that of others and the surrounding environment.

Most Javanese people would never think of those moments as waiting. Even before a performance or another event begins, the attitude is one of just being there and knowing that what is about to happen will begin when all that is needed is ready. Needed does not mean the functional side only, but the overall atmosphere in which events take place.

'Waiting' as described here means slowing down. In slowing down, there is time to see, to feel, and to tune into your environment. You leave your tunnel view and open. In 'waiting', you let go of your expectations, your holding on to how things should be. And things may as well get done without your doing.

There is a moment that stays with me clearly to this day. It was at the end of my time in Java. A friend and I were in Jakarta and wanted to go to Yogyakarta by bus. Upon entering the bus station we realized it was *Idul Fitri* (the end of Ramadan with its special festivities). Oh my God, we had not thought about it! The bus station was crowded with people, and at first sight it did not look like we would get a ticket for our planned ride that day. We would be uncomfortably stuck in Jakarta. We stood at the side, watching the buses coming into the station, the people running and squeezing in. Bus after bus was packed. We stood there just waiting, standing still next to each other, completely relaxed. There was not much thought at all. Just this presence of being there, watching, receiving the scene, connecting. After quite a while a man approached us asking where we wanted to go. We told him our destination and he said, "come with me!" As we did not have anything to lose, we followed him, leaving the terminal and walking in the direction of the empty buses which were coming in. He finally approached one of the buses and stopped it, spoke with the driver and then shuffled us in with a friendly gesture, refusing the money we wanted to offer. A few minutes later we drove into the terminal, smiles on our faces, where more people climbed into the bus. Was it luck or was it the result of patience, receptivity and just being present?

The process of 'waiting' not only slows you down but also loosens the impulse towards grasping. There is always something we long for, aim at, grasp for, expect. When you live in a culture where buses do not run on schedule (if there are any at all), where things you would like to get repaired are just getting done in a timing that stays

mysterious to you, where your teacher arrives according to what he feels is the right moment rather than a set hour, where a gathering begins only after people change their seats as often as necessary so everybody feels the arrangement is *cocok* (fitting), you slowly but surely change. Your mind gets put to rest.

You are in your environment in a different, more subtle way. You open more to your senses; you see, listen, smell, touch and feel. This leads you to sense atmospheres while your awareness has a chance to expand.

You enter into *rasa*, a quality of feeling. *Rasa* is a state of being, highly valued in the Javanese culture. It basically means sensing what is around you, relating to others from your feeling nature rather than your mind. From an inner place that, when cleaned and refined, can be a place of feeling, unclouded by emotions.<sup>1</sup>

## Hearing the World

The door bell to our house in Baluwarti, Solo, Central Java had been ringing. Suparmi, our housekeeper, was already at the door before the bell rang, ready to open it for the guest. It was not by chance. She always approached the door before someone rang the bell. How magical! She must have a sixth sense!

Java is a mystical place full of mysterious events, yet what in the beginning might be a mystery to you is often just a different way to live. Javanese people listen to the world. What I came to understand is that they perceive the world mainly through hearing rather than through looking.

It took quite a while to find out that Suparmi had been hearing a bird that was announcing the visitor. Birds do that. They inform the environment about changes in the atmosphere, especially about people entering their sphere. Suparmi was just attentive to sounds. It was natural to her.

It could be quite irritating to be in the presence of a Javanese group who were talking together. We would not have direct eye contact as I had been previously used to when talking. In Europe, it is common to look directly at the person with whom we are speaking, whereas in Java communication takes place through hearing one other. Looking at one other is considered very direct and somehow excluding. In staying connected to hearing, awareness can open 360 degrees. The eyes soften and adopt a receptive quality.

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1 On the concept of *rasa* and the Javanese world view, see Laura Romano (2013).

This sensing and indirectness is a characteristic of Javanese culture, approaching life from an angle that I was not used to. Try and listen to the world instead of looking at it. See the effect it has on your body and the way you perceive the world and meet people. For example, you might become more sensitive to the feeling quality in speech. The eyes can close, the ears never do. They can just select incoming information by focusing on near or far, but they always stay open.

It was quite a challenge for us during our first stay in Gadjahan<sup>2</sup> in 1984 when we practiced in the *pendopo* (a space that serves to connect the private part of a house and the public and is often open on three sides), while a man who had come to sell coffee beans was grinding them close to us in a very noisy machine. There were also people passing by; Hendra, the owner of the house, repairing his car in a corner of the garden and talking loudly to other people; *pembantus* (housekeepers) chatting with each other.

In Java there is never complete silence. For example, there may be sound at night from a radio in your neighbor's house, where they are listening to a shadow puppet play until the early morning. The sound is a continuously shifting carpet that just changes its patterns, and everybody is comfortable and relaxed on it... except most of the Westerners, who feel easily disturbed. One reason is the Western cultural tendency to focus on oneself whereas the Javanese usually stay open to collective moods and movements.

Focusing in general is not the principal attitude in Java. With focusing you exclude. You create a central point, pushing aside all else that seems unrelated. You decide what is right and necessary for your chosen focus and what is not. Javanese culture does not function this way, nor does the individual living in it.

Focusing creates boundaries, but in the Javanese attitude it is not by exclusion that boundaries get established. Looking at the language, for example, one can see that Javanese people try to avoid the word *tidak* which means no, because it is considered to be too strong. It is preferred to leave more openness, using words like *belum* (not yet) or *kurang* (less). Instead of saying *tidak baik* (not good), one would say *kurang baik* (less than good, not really good) to make it softer. This way, everything is seen to be in motion, still able to manifest. Also, there are various ways of saying 'yes.' The tone of the 'yes' indicates how close it is to a real 'yes' or if it means 'no.'

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<sup>2</sup> Gadjahan is an area of Solo where Laura Romano with her former husband Hendra used to run a homestay, which became well known Prapto's students.

In my experience the ears are connected to feelings. Perceiving the world predominantly through the ears rather than the eyes means that feelings become refined. It was not only the outer world that I learned to perceive in a different way, but also it was a shift into perceiving inner worlds. Receiving the condition of my physical and emotional presence let information come into my awareness from deep layers of my being. With growing sensitivity this process became more and more subtle.

‘Hearing the world’ affects the awareness of spatial relationship and timing – timing in the sense of connectedness. We are individual beings, yet connected in various ways, and the qualities of what I call here ‘waiting’ and ‘hearing the world’ brought me closer to this experience.

### Respect

There exists in Javanese culture a special sense for placing and positioning yourself in relation to others.

This cultural sense of appropriate positioning becomes visible in the home, particularly if you are not a member of the family, in which case you are received in the *pendopo*, between the public and the private area. It can also be seen in people’s ways of lowering themselves when passing in front of others already sitting. You become aware of this attitude in relating to each other – it can sometimes be very subtle.

This takes place in all kinds of situations and events, like with the *pembantu* who takes care of a house, as Suparmi did for us. Relating to her challenged me to accept that she would always make sure to place herself lower than me, which meant that if I talked to her while I was sitting on a chair, she would go and sit on the ground. Coming from the West with the idea that everybody is equal and the anti-authoritarian attitude of my generation, this was not so easy to take. Yet she taught me that lowering oneself in space did not mean one has to lose grace and dignity. I learned to respond and to own my position comfortably. Our relationship grew in mutual respect.

Before coming to Java, respect and respectfulness had connotations that belonged to the old days of my parents and a society we had opposed in the sixties. Now, living in a culture that was clearly hierarchically structured, with its visible formalities and expressions of respect, I had to review my opinions. Not only was I

touched by the respectfulness in behavior that I met, but also I could see that respectfulness protects one's own and the other person's dignity. And dignity is a human right and value in itself that so often gets stepped on without one even knowing.

It is necessary to give space in relating to each other to keep your own and the other's dignity. The attitude of 'respectfulness' does exactly that: it creates such a space.

The three cultural aspects described have one thing in common: they open awareness to all sides. The attitude of 'waiting' leads to a relaxed state of connectedness to the overall atmosphere one is in, 'hearing the world' shifts one into the center of a circular awareness, and 'respectfulness' creates the space for relating in a way that gives a chance to see the whole rather than only oneself.

Yet only after I had returned to the West and taken on my new task to be a guide and teacher in this movement practice could I begin to see the values I have talked about. I then experienced how they had already become a part of my being, providing a source from which my work evolved.

~ ~ ~

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**Christina Stelzer**, Diplom Psychologist, studied Tai chi with Gia-fu Feng (Colorado) and dance therapy with Anna Halprin (California) and was part of the pioneer period 1982-1988 when a small group of people from the West, together with Prapto in Java, created the ground from which Amerta Movement rose. Since then she has continued to develop this movement approach within her work, calling it 'GangArt' (meaning the specific style and attitude of one's walk/approach to life). She teaches in Germany and Austria and takes students regularly for retreats to the Greek island of Paros.

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