

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 4

Amerta and Tibetan Buddhism

Monika Förster

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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4. AMERTA AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Beyond the Cushion

Monika Förster (Germany/Holland)

It had been a particularly foggy day up on Mount Lawu, where we had gone to practice in Candi Sukuh. With its ornate reliefs and giant stone turtles surrounded by enormous trees, this fertility temple from the 15th or 16th century – its origins remain obscure – is often said to resemble a Mayan structure, plunked down near Solo, Indonesia. There were about a dozen of us students, and the day had brought exertion, exposure... revelation and joy.

That night, during our after-dinner reflection session, I asked Prapto a direct question, but he replied with an observation that has remained with me ever since:

*“Very good, you didn’t hit yourself with your own mind.
That’s very hard work. Good luck with it...”*

At that moment I realized how – and to what degree – I was constantly judging, evaluating and criticizing myself. It was a realization that brought many tears, and, ultimately, gratefully, a dawning capacity for compassion for myself.

I soon realized that the evening had not freed me from my demons. But through continuing practice I experienced wonderful moments where my mind was at ease, and the beauty of the world spoke to me... The absence of inner struggle was a vast relief.

This is a typical snapshot/example of working with Prapto. Beyond his actual practices and methods, and perhaps more important than them, Prapto establishes a kind of general ambience for teaching Amerta Movement. I liken it to his rolling out a ‘mind carpet’ upon which we can all move, learn and interact. The

atmosphere is filled with the strength, calmness and quality of his mind – a precious state of pure awareness that accepts (without judging and without attaching) all that comes to consciousness: sense perceptions, thoughts, memories, emotions, all you see, all you hear, all you... everything. Dwelling in this atmosphere, his attitude is contagious; after some time my own mind also became less agitated.

When working with Prapto, the atmosphere allowed me to play, to rest, to explore, to grow, to touch, to be touched, to cry, to listen, to stop, to relax... Memories and emotions often appeared from the well of consciousness; the monsters from the cupboard showed their faces. But supported by Prapto's non-judgmental atmosphere, I was able to let this happen and stay present in the moment, savoring the breezes touching my skin, admiring the colors of the wild Indonesian flowers, relishing the sweet, thick, tropical air. It turned memories that normally overwhelmed me into memories that are just memories. It was deeply healing.

Back Home

When I returned to Amsterdam four months later I, perhaps inevitably, longed for the feelings of being at peace with myself that I had known while working with Prapto. But this was accompanied by the painful insight that it would be nearly impossible for me to return to this way of being at ease without Prapto's support.

I started to search, and eventually found a path – Tibetan Buddhism. In particular, the books of Trungpa Rinpoche and of the great American Buddhist Pema Chödrön helped me to understand the processes that Prapto had been guiding me through. Thereafter, through a deep engagement with meditation, my mind started to become more spacious and less judgmental – just what I was looking for. It was both a continuation and development of what I had started to experience with Prapto at Candi Sukuh.

Mind as an Ally?

For me, meditation is a means of “turning my mind into an ally” (as Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche puts it.). In my early meditation practice, I discovered that I couldn't just tell my mind: “Quiet down!” But through recognizing my thinking as thinking, and by simply returning to my own breath, meditation gave me a wonderful opportunity to understand my mind's processes – how emotions and thoughts constantly arise and tickle each other. When approached

non-judgmentally, with lots of compassion for oneself, one sees that all of this – the returning thoughts, the repeating patterns of response, the disruptive emotions – is just the dance of the mind. Returning to the simple rhythms of the breath lets us dis-identify with the mind's automatic activity and understand that we are not solely our emotions.

Much the same evolution occurs in Amerta Movement. When we move while remaining in tune with the wisdom of our body, we practice staying present with every sense: with all we hear, all we smell, all we touch and see. At the same time, we also listen to our inner weather report, all those thoughts, emotions, and memories that arise from consciousness.

One part of our movement practice is what Prapto calls *finding proportion*: using the entirety of the body to receive and embody whatever arises in consciousness. This includes all the thoughts, fears, emotions, and perceptions of both the outer and the inner worlds, really everything that we experience. We stay present in our bodies, sometimes expressing, sometimes just listening; and through this, we develop the priceless ability to engage with, in productive ways, whatever presents itself. We're less overwhelmed by all the inputs, promptings, emotions, and demons that dwell in our store-box. And this, in turn, helps reduce the sense – and feeling – that we are victims of our own mind.

Vividly I remember working individually with Prapto one evening after practicing all day at Borobudur, the wonderful huge Buddhist temple. I had been feeling pretty stuck in emotional turmoil for some days, and I had tried everything to get back into my comfort zone, but nothing seemed to work...

...until quite surprisingly I found myself running through the *pendopo* like a bull, using my hands as my horns and with Prapto as my matador.

As funny as it was in its theatrical appearance – the group witnessing burst into laughter – it gave me a strong insight into my way of dealing with difficult emotions: push, push, push!

After some more rounds of crying and laughing while chasing after Prapto, I went out into the garden, moving and singing – letting my tears be washed off by the warm tropical rain.

Letting my 'bull-ness' be seen fully, by myself and the others, was as painful as it was sweet. It helped me enormously to find more gentleness towards myself.

Bowing Towards Daily Life

Amerta Movement starts from the attitude of bowing towards our daily life.

Many spiritual paths start from the idea of retreating from the world to achieve enlightenment.

In Amerta Movement all aspects of our life/experience are welcome.

Many of us have developed habits of forgetting about ourselves in order to adapt and function in our families and in the social situations of our upbringing. Often we apply more or less fixed strategies, patterns of thoughts, and behavior to our life situation. Although these strategies were often functional and even necessary then, now they limit our possibilities of relating to the world as well as relating to our own experience. In practicing Amerta, we not only start to see our patterns, but also have an opportunity to relate in new ways. Moving with each other we can experiment with attitudes/patterns of movement different to those well known to us from our youth.

Staying present, or, if we get lost, just coming back to ourselves, reconnecting with our inner world, we practice perceiving all the different layers of the inner or outer world while being involved in it.

At Candi Sukuh, because the temple has a strong mystical atmosphere, we can easily be absorbed by its energy. In our movement practice up there we were “*building our own place*” by putting down four stones and creating a square on the ground. Again and again we would study the composition, letting our body be informed by it, finding our physical proportion...

After some time of doing the exercise in a physical way I had to face my inability to rest in my own atmosphere, to feel at home on that square meter. Puh! that was so confronting – my ‘home’ felt deserted and shallow. Jealously I looked at the other students who seemed to be so happy, decorating their ‘homes’ with leaves and flowers, singing and celebrating their at-homeness. I still remember exactly the first moment of feeling at peace there between my four stones.

My gradually growing capacity to ‘stand on my own ground’ changed my ability to relate to the other students, to the temple and to the situations of my life in general. Back in Amsterdam I renovated my flat and transformed it into a real home, from where I could move into the world with a sense of having an anchor...

These days I still practice grounding myself through receiving the composition when I feel I have become absorbed by the situations of my daily life. For example: sitting in a team meeting or even in a café, I change the composition by moving the tea cup, lining up the spoon with the table corner, organizing pen and paper. Creating more context allows me to stay embodied throughout situations which would otherwise mentally or emotionally absorb me.

The Blessing of Being Seen

One important aspect of Amerta Movement is the function of the witnesses. Not always, but very often, we practice in smaller groups with the others and Prapto witnessing the practice. This adds another level of awareness to our practice. In being witnessed with kindness we feel seen and heard, we can feel touched and understood.

It also adds a level of understanding to our practice, as we become more aware of our patterns and potentials; for example, sometimes we might be lost in thought... we might be sad or happy or bored... we might do anything to jump out of our experience in order to avoid ourselves. We might be in contact with ourselves, the others, the elements... sometimes we might 'just be' (that is to say we might just be simply present with what is).

Allowing ourselves to be seen helps us to become aware of this whole dance of states, activities, thoughts, and emotions. In time we develop our own friendly witness, which stays with us through the trials and tribulations, the joys and difficulties of our daily lives. Our friendly witness helps us to just perceive what is going on, instead of constantly trying to manipulate our experience. At times this might include having to see that we don't like our experience. Slowly we engage less with acting out or ignoring what's going on.

This attitude helps our process towards crystallization: we learn to bear the knowledge that we are who we are, accepting our shadow and our beauty. At times when strong emotions come up, we witness ourselves in fully feeling them – without having to change anything or find a solution, and without being overwhelmed – we just continue moving and receiving our emotions. Instead of repeating catharsis we can find the door that leads towards a new way of being.

In essence, Amerta Movement is a practice of realization and creativity in daily life.

How to Give Awareness Without Creating Stagnation

For me, and I guess for many others, it is not easy to stay embodied on the meditation cushion. If we don't want to experience our emotions fully, we tend to 'shut down' the connection with our body. Our breathing becomes shallow, our body tenses and our experience becomes less immediate.

In actively integrating my body in Amerta Movement, I experience much less physical stagnation; sometimes inviting expression helps me to get moving again.

In my movement practice I noticed that there was a stream of cultivating awareness through many wonderful techniques: line and point, zooming, naming, three dimensions, body has volume, finding proportion... After being involved in these practices for some time, they often started to feel stale; as if my soul, my emotions had no being; a sort of stagnation of consciousness itself which can happen if we try to hold ourselves too tightly in being aware. Answering my question about this Prapto said:

"It is very difficult to teach awareness without giving stagnation."

My impression is that Prapto invites expression when he feels somebody or the general atmosphere is starting to stagnate. He might say "*find your mouth of movement*" or "*all your body has face.*" Often the music he is making supports us in staying out of stagnation within the flow of embodied consciousness.

In my daily practice of meditation – and elsewhere – I often feel and respond to this sense of stagnation and a lack of being witnessed from the outside. In response, I have started to work more and more with my voice. It seems to bridge the gap.

The practice of sounding

In my meditation practice, sometimes I feel less connected with my body or my mind becomes over-active. Often, unseen and unfelt emotions churn beneath this restless mind. At these times, I make vocal sounds to allow me to connect with my inner atmosphere. They can be any sounds at all – gurgling, whining, whispering, humming – or it can just be an out-breath and a well-placed sigh. There's no need to sing a song or construct a melody; each out-breath brings its own music, and I simply let these songs come into being. This free issuing of sound prevents my mind from describing or categorizing

my state; I don't fix myself as being sad, angry, happy, or anything else, and so stay open to the further free expression of my soul. Each breath is a new experience and a new allowing, each capable of opening new windows. The 'autopilot' button has not been pressed.

One technique that supports me in this process is to count my out-breaths; usually I go to 108. Regardless of the number, I am frequently – and delightfully – surprised by the range and variety of moods that I make. Furthermore, I am now witnessing myself in the process of making them, providing another and deeper access route towards all the many things I want, and need, to be aware of.

In practicing and teaching Amerta Movement I often work with sound and movement. I invite myself or my students to move and, at the same time, to find sound.

“...if I move, my body still has sound

...if I make sound, my sound still has body.”

It is not that we have to be full-on singing and full-on moving – although that might happen at times. It is particularly the shifting of the focus that helps me to stay present. When we sound, our emotions might take over and we might get lost in them; reminding ourselves to invite our physical bodies in and becoming aware of our senses can bring us back to the present moment. Having our focus on moving and on our perception of sensations, we might lose the connection to our inner world; reminding ourselves that our body has sound reconnects us with our inner ‘weather report.’

In Amerta Movement we practice being out in the world and at the same time staying connected with the inner world of perceptions, thoughts and emotions. We learn how to stay more embodied.

In allowing ourselves to be seen, our capacity for witnessing ourselves in a friendly way grows. Speaking with the words of the Sufi tradition, Amerta Movement is a path to learn how “to be in the world but not ‘of’ it.”

Epilogue

Now, in 2013, back at Candi Sukuh again after more than 20 years I can clearly see how Amerta and meditation helped me to find more friendliness and generosity towards myself. Meditation helped me to settle my mind, Amerta kept me from mis-using meditation to suppress emotions; both deeply changed the way I am able to relate to the world and myself. This makes it easier to look further into my

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patterns and understand them. Instead of judging myself for having those patterns, I am able to experiment with finding new ways of relating – be it towards myself or towards the outside world.

Staying more embodied, my mind is less hyperactive and my emotions have more ground. Though not less intense, I don't experience them as frightening or overwhelming any more. Being more at ease with myself and the world allows my body to relax and my senses to wake up. The dance of life, with all its beauties and difficulties, becomes more spacious, light, and joyous.

~ ~ ~

Monika Förster graduated with a Performance Art degree in New Dance from the Amsterdam Hogeschool van de Kunsten. She has taught movement at the Amsterdam and Utrecht Theater Schools and teaches at the Schule der Bewegung in Germany. Since 1991, Monika has studied regularly with Prapto in Europe and Java. She has hosted his workshops in Amsterdam for 11 years, including the 11th International Movement Arts Meeting in Amsterdam in 2015. Monika is a practicing Buddhist, studies with the Ridhwan School and is a Shiatsu therapist and teacher. Monika's life's work encourages physical awareness, creative expression and body-mind integration.

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