

# 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 6*

*A Dog Practicing 'Talking Body'*

**José Mulder van de Graaf**

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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## **6. A DOG PRACTICING 'TALKING BODY'**

José Mulder van de Graaf (Bolivia)

While our puppy Princesa was growing up, she behaved like other dogs, but later, as she began getting closer to us, she developed astonishing peculiarities in her way of adapting to human circumstances. Her amazing way of taking part in the movement practice of 'Talking Body' is an anecdote worth telling.

Princesa jumped into the car whenever I traveled to Santa Cruz to teach at the Art School. There she was not only present at the Anthropology and the Pre-Hispanic Art classes, mostly sitting on a chair like the students, but was actively involved in the 'Talking Body' workshops I used to offer to them as well. I will include in this peculiar story reflections about my practice, which is based on how I understood Amerta Movement, which I had the opportunity to learn in Indonesia under the guidance of Prapto about 24 years ago.

I met Prapto at a time when I was involved with shamanism and studying methods to achieve extra-sensorial perceptions and altered states of consciousness. My research included body and movement-centred methods like Gurdjieff's sacred dance, but also Asian methods that I felt would give a disciplining frame for me, such as yoga and Tai chi. Later I came into contact with Amerta Movement, the method created by Prapto with a strong background in Buddhism and traditional Javanese culture. This attracted my special interest as a method that seemingly did fit me best. I was amazed by the practice, because both sources, the inner feeling and the outer reading that I practiced as a child – a story I will tell in the next section – could be embodied and expressed while we move in the way it is meant in this practice: with absolute freedom of action, not performing defined movement patterns or structures, not applying pre-determined rhythms and developing a priori postures or attitudes that we supposedly 'should' achieve.

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As a young boy I lived for part of the year in the southern Andean countryside of Bolivia, where my father used to work as an engineer for the state mining company. I loved to walk around these places with my father's dogs, across nearby slopes and through the valleys, often spending the whole day and even the night with my animal companions. At the age of twelve, while traveling along a newly made road with my father driving the car, we found ceramics and bones spread on the ground. My father was sure that this place was an ancient Indian burial ground that was actually being destroyed by the bulldozer as it removed the earth. He encouraged me to start digging the next day to save what was left in the partially-destroyed graveyards. This event marked the beginning of a fascination of mine for old Indian settlements, for doing my rounds looking for items that once belonged to people of ancient cultures, for going on foot through the Andean landscape in search of ritual sites and graveyards. 'Reading' the landscape, as I would today call what I started doing, became a big passion to me, as well as a skill that I needed to continue exploring. An outcome of these experiences was my interest in archeology and a large collection of ceramics and other items: skulls, toys for children made out of clay, etc., which I later handed over to the national museum. The passion of my childhood changed later into an interest in ethnological topics, anthropology, shamanism, and so on, and was finally the power within that gave me the impulse to get to know Amerta Movement and meet Prapto.

Princesa's behavior used to leave everybody astonished. Almost as soon as a 'Talking Body' practice had started, she would begin to 'perform' naturally and easily; she walked smoothly through the midst of the participants, lay down on the floor, sat down and stood up again. Everything she did was done in harmony with the movement done by the people performing 'following the line of the movement' – this is an important part of the practice in which the mover comprehends a dynamic balancing of the body through space and time in accordance with his feelings, his personal needs, and the requirements of the group that is practicing. The body positions that Princesa assumed were of course ones that dogs are able to do, but they were remarkable because her bodily expressions would fit into the practice situation she and the students were in. She

would walk from one place to another balancing and weighing the space, or would walk in between two people affecting the direction of their movement, or would influence their speed or intensity while communicating bodily with them. Her facial expressions, ear positions and her gaze used to change while she embraced physical contact, either by letting other people pet her or by being touched by accident, and she too succeeded in indicating, even with a dog's 'smile,' her satisfaction at being part of the practice situation. Remaining in the process, she often contributed actively to creating the group's next steps and managed to let the participants know that she was to be considered part of the ongoing quest to find personal and group dynamic balance in movement, just as the other participants did. The impulse for all these actions was exclusively hers; I didn't intervene in any way, neither suggesting she change her position or place, nor animating her to do this or that; there was nothing that she hadn't decided by herself.

The experiences with Princesa led me to formulate questions like: "How could a dog practice 'Talking Body' together with humans?" "Was her participation unintended and casual, or did she take part simply because she 'thought' it was clever to act similarly to the other participants, maybe hoping she would get rewarded for her smartness?"

Princesa's performance made me recognize that 'instinct' was the main trait she had for adapting to the circumstances of the practice, and that this 'instinct' is a major resource we humans also apply in doing this practice. I realized that 'instinct' could be considered a more important resource than others, like the ones we usually call awareness and consciousness and which I formerly thought of as being more relevant. Princesa's action in the 'Talking Body' sessions was the result of a dynamic condition inherent to the practice, one that enables animals and humans to better adapt to changing circumstances; this quality being to me pure instinct, which I understand to be not only an inherent behavioral action, but also an adaptation to the environment, often emerging from instantaneous impulses, regardless of whether they are a conscious adaptation or not. Consequently, the phenomenon of her participation in the practice of 'Talking Body' could be understood to be a result of nature's intelligence in its 'instinctive' manifestations, emerged from the essential consciousness all creatures have in common. It also illustrates to me that there is no need for a human intelligence

or human thinking to participate in this practice, but it shows also that humans are needed to create a situation where a practice of this kind can be carried out, because it needs a special framing. Both instinct and intuition are not only manifestations of an innate intelligence, but are evolving attributes that are being developed while we practice 'Talking Body'. We can gain additional abilities when we incorporate intelligence that works not only on the rational level but also embraces our 'feeling' capability. This 'feeling' is focused on the organism itself, on the soul, and on practicing as collective involvement. The experience we share while we practice could be likened to us weaving a carpet in collaboration with other entities: with humans, animals, elements of nature, etc. None of these entities have to perceive this weaving as their 'personal' achievement; everyone participating recognizes that the weaving is a common effort, as our (individual) input into the interweaving is itself part of nature's interdependent work.

It is common sense that humans and animals differ. Animals have qualities we don't have and lack attributes humans are able to develop – for example, our reflective intelligence, our rationalizing and thinking capabilities, and our awareness and our consciousness of the self, which is the realm people try to develop by following paths of personal and spiritual growth. I am not at all sure if animals really lack the attribute considered by anthropologists to most accurately define the difference between humans and other animals: our capacity for symbolic abstraction. Nevertheless, it would be too reductionist to say that Princesa's involvement was solely a result of instinct, or intuition, without considering the quality of 'feeling' she had in common with the students. This aspect we often forget when we think about the differences and similarities among the human, animal, and plant kingdoms. Princesa clearly 'felt' a sense of belonging to the class, because she had a close affinity with the students taking part in the practice. She often would look at me as if to say: "I'm not a common dog," at least I imagined it that way, receiving her message through her body and her facial gestures. Other dogs I have had didn't behave in the same way, even though they maintained a very close relation to me as well. They didn't look forward to going to the city or to the classes, and they preferred to stay at home and spend their day hunting, behaving like dogs that live within the social characteristics of a dog pack.

To develop a more accurate sense for understanding Princessa's conduct, I will introduce the concept of 'lingua franca' – used by the philosopher and biologist Andreas Weber in his book *Alles Fühlt* – which I consider to be another basic condition for practicing Amerta Movement and 'Talking Body'.

According to Weber, all creatures and all bodies on earth possess a language, the 'language of feelings.' This 'true tongue', as he calls this language as well, is considered to be always present and in continuous activity within beings and their communication systems. It is, therefore, the 'true tongue' of feelings that allows humans, animals, and plants to perceive external phenomena in a direct way, before the differentiation produced by hearing, smelling, sight, and touch start to interpret a given situation. This 'true tongue' doesn't refer to an abstract code, which spoken language can be, but rather to a direct expression of our feelings through our body, through neuronal dynamics, through excitement of the circulatory system, and through mimicry and the expression of gestures. If the heart is excited, regardless of the situation and regardless of whether it belongs to a human or an animal, even to a frog or to an insect, it will always mean that this being is excited – in a state of high emotion and emergency. Weber explains that humans and animals are able to read feelings, because there is no differentiation between external and internal feelings, they are one. The feeling being shown by a certain body is the feeling itself and not merely a symbol of it.

Our mind has the ability to deduce what we 'are supposed to do', if we want to achieve something we deserve in a certain situation. This process, which we call 'thinking', is one that we commonly carry out using our rational faculties. Our 'feeling' capacities are rarely consulted to find out what we 'are supposed to do.' We often seem to lose access to resources that are available to us besides the 'thinking' one: resources that are also capable of deducing what we should do in certain moments, while carrying out actions, and so on. From my point of view one of the main resources is the 'true tongue' mentioned above, the 'language of feelings' that enables us to understand and to express, even to enhance knowledge in another way. The 'true tongue' can also expand through the dynamics of the movement practice. Feeling and emotional qualities can increase the deepness of a dialog, and the extended language can intensify the lucidity of timing while bodies meet. They can increase our abilities to listen, to smell, and to look. They can enable us to 'comprehend'

the space, to 'acknowledge' nature while it constantly changes, and, last but not least, to recognize our self. A special outcome of these processes is that we become able to recognize that the motives and causes that evolve during the practice aren't 'casual.' It is rather that we humans initiate them on purpose by practicing and developing skills, by cultivating our sensitivity. This cultivating capability is a gift that humans have, one that may point to a remarkable difference between ourselves and other species.

Years ago, while practicing Amerta Movement in Indonesia, I entered into a space that was not totally unknown to me but, until this practice, had never been really filled with a bodily expression. I am referring to a 'feeling' of being profoundly touched by the impulse to pray and to its expression of gathering and folding both hands. Of course I had seen other people fold hands and I had done it myself, especially as a child, when an attitude of praying came more from a 'religious' and a 'cultural' background and not from the attitude of 'nature expressing through my body.' My body, not the mind, found the right expression for the feelings that arose in me while my body was 'following the line of the movement' of which I spoke above. This letting the self, together with the body, follow the line of the movement is to me one of the more substantial practices we do in 'Body Talking' and in Amerta Movement. It means to understand that this movement is itself 'feelings in movement,' it is also a way of 'dialoguing in feeling,' and it is 'accepting guidance that is provided by our body,' because we use our body for experiencing all of it. 'Following the line of the movement' can become a skill, one that is 'felt' and not (only) 'thought.' This skill can become an attitude supported by the laws of nature, as it is an attitude that doesn't follow moral codes or social positions that evolved in our cultural and social backgrounds, but rather follows the skill of moving the feeling-self. If we are open-minded and have an open heart, letting our feelings be fluent, our movement will be fluent as well.

As I said before, 'Talking Body' and Amerta Movement are not structured practices; unlike many other methods, there are no movement patterns. Doing the non-designed and non-arranged practice we are able to stay attuned to the needs of our bodies and attuned to the genuine emotions that arise and become integrated in our bodily expressions while shaping our movement. We follow the line of movement that is tailored by our self, according to our

individual needs, according to our body's state, and according to our mental and emotional condition. Practicing it we are people seeking for 'truthfulness,' while 'truthfulness' here means authenticity, sincerity, and being steady. In this way, the practice connects to the honest and frank feelings that our hearts can create while we move. It is astonishing that all these wonders happen during the practice, way before we become mentally conscious of their existence.

Taking part in the movement workshops must have been an outstanding opportunity for Princesa to share a unique relationship with her human friends. She simply did the same things the students did when they started talking bodily to one another, moving mostly slowly, but sometimes also fast, more softly, more harmoniously, with more gentleness and care than normally. She spoke through the 'natural' language of her body, using the same language of feelings they used, not solely a language for expression, but also for receiving, for reading the laws of nature and for experiencing what nature's intelligence intends. It is to me not at all common that she, being a dog, grabbed the chance to communicate with others in this way, becoming transformed into one more student.

People know that body and verbal languages don't match in many ways, one reason being that underlying motivations and stimuli are expressed differently in each language. Another one is that the body language of 'Talking Body,' articulating through three-dimensional expressions, does not follow rational and logical structures, and as I said before, 'Talking Body' becomes a receiving and expressing organ, receiving feelings rather than rational thoughts, and it receives and expresses with the 'whole body,' without the 'filter' of reasoning. 'Talking Body' and similar practices are based on procedures in which our reasoning isn't asked to intervene because the actions are done in a pre-reflexive state of mind. There might be thinking or reasoning at times, but these won't dominate our action and will mostly arise after the practice's sequence has finished. Moving the way we move – expressing and receiving, embracing rhythms by giving continuum and fluency to our movement, actually being present with all our senses and emotions – we inevitably get ourselves into a different state of mind than the one we usually adopt in daily life. It is an altered state similar to the state of being that we access in meditation or in prayer, or even in relaxing, which is very different to the daily one and to the dynamics of verbal communication, in which the emphasis is mostly placed on

the content and not on the tone, not on the cadence and not on the rhythm of our speech.

## Summary and Concluding Thoughts

The practice described in this chapter can be considered one that merges into a systemic perspective of natural laws that govern life.<sup>1</sup>

During the movement practice of 'Talking Body' we transmit feelings through bodily signs and gestures; we do this automatically and implicitly, not as a narration of something that did or should happen. The transfer of feelings is the language we share with all living entities. We express through it 'natural' attitudes, cultural norms, and even spiritual perceptions. All of this occurs through the moving body's self-organization and dynamic regulations.

We know from life praxis that not every human chooses to self-organize. Humans are free *not* to agree with self-organization of any kind, not to agree with social or cultural norms, not to agree with an attitude of conserving the planet for future generations, living peacefully and not killing each other, etc. We commonly say that these are human options due to the condition of 'free will' that supposedly characterizes the species. Therefore, 'free will' stands for an innate differentiation between humans and animals, which supposedly don't have this capability. Humans do obviously have the freedom to choose what they want to perceive or how they want to act, but the attempt to remain outside the schema of interdependence that nature provides to all entities is never really successful. It is clear that a person can never be freed from creating interdependent relations with nature and society. If someone does anything against the existing suggestions of nature, then life will become difficult for him; it will become unbalanced as he is breaking the fluent movement-line of his own life. Nature will inevitably re-establish a balance, as it does all the time, with all entities. Nature doesn't decide to act this way or that way; she is the process itself, she is life living, and she is biology, chemistry and physics proceeding.

1 Life has given me the opportunity to follow nature's rhythms in the rainforest in the Bolivian Amazon for the last 18 years. For this reason, I allowed myself to refer to biological concepts in this chapter. The term 'systemic' concerns a view of life and natural laws, whose main argument relies on the interdependence of all phenomena. It acknowledges a single cell as the most primitive form of life, the organized bunch of them becoming an organism, then a species and in turn, an ecosystem. An ecosystem can be considered a big organism, and the global ecosystem formed by the earth is an organized, intertwined, self-organizing system. Joachim Bauer and Andreas Weber inspired me by embracing views about life phenomena that rely on cooperation and resonance not on selfishness and competition.

People who believe in the existence of nature's consciousness understand evolution as steps in the transformation of consciousness. I am referring to people like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Erwin László. Thinkers like these believe that as the species with 'reflexive intelligence' and a developed 'symbolic capacity,' humans are not necessarily superior to other animals, nor necessarily the highest species in evolution, but rather the species that must assume a special responsibility for life on earth as they are a unique species, and this uniqueness provides an option to mature, to evolve the capacity to feel, to access altruism, benevolence, charity, mercy, kindness, detachment, nobility, chivalry, and other qualities that humans are capable of developing. Today we know that the phenomena of life are organized in intertwined systems that are integrated in wider self-organizing structures, and we know that observing nature and its fluctuations seems to be a good way to understand life's dynamics. The 'Talking Body' practice, which to me is a path of self-development, can help us improve our awareness for it. It can help to raise our consciousness as well, by acknowledging the interactive mechanisms that govern natural and social life. Last, but not least, it is a practice that supports an understanding of nature's magnificence by recognizing our self as being part of nature.

Princesa helped us find balance during practice, but the most outstanding part of her intervening was that it was pure and gratifying 'feeling,' freed from thinking based on 'right or wrong.' It was nature acting through her, healing and nourishing. She lived with me, my wife, horses, donkeys, dogs, cats and forest animals, for 8 years in our 'jungle-house' in Bolivia.

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