

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 7

"Make Less the Hoping"

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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7. “MAKE LESS THE HOPING”

Sandra Reeve (UK)

Following several warm, thoughtful and funny speeches and some musical offerings, I stood up with a smile and moved out into a space between the tables. Momentarily my gaze travelled across a sea of faces: faces that I love; faces that I hardly knew but would come to love; joyful, generous faces looking up at me with expressions that were expectant, amused, quizzical, knowing. In that moment my inner eye also saw the faces of absent loved ones who couldn't be there for our wedding.

Traditionally, a bride in England does not give a speech at her own wedding.

“The passion of my life is the art of movement. I would like to move for Andrew and for you all to celebrate today.”

My legs were shaking slightly and I was worried that my dress might slip if the dance became somewhat wild. I had no way of knowing in advance where this movement might take me. Gently I breathed, and as I raised my arms in the air with a swooping movement, I turned my back towards the audience. The movement was familiar to me. It is one that allows me to pay attention to the sensations of my being-in-movement and to cross the threshold into a dynamic world – a world of movement perceived from movement rather than from stasis.

As I continued the turn and faced my friends once more, I remembered that I had adopted or amplified this habitual turning movement as a way of giving myself an embodied moment to relax my fear. I had practised for many years allowing **Abhaya-mudra** (the Buddha's hand mudra of 'making less the fear' seen on the north side of Borobudur temple)¹ to inform my movement and, through it, my attitude. Just now I understood that this particular habitual, almost

¹ See images of each mudra in the Additional Resources: <http://bit.ly/ELtp17>

ritual, shaping-in-motion [was it a movement mudra?] had arisen directly out of the quality of the Abhaya-mudra in my body.

This was it. This was the moment. No preparation – just readiness. Movement had been, and is, a lifelong practice. I relaxed and followed my movement as it evolved in that particular place and context. I just let myself move without a plan and tried to stay present and alive to each movement as it happened, feeling the sensations in my body and the sensations in the environment, responding to those sensations and gradually 'reading' the situation as I moved.

For me, the process is like reading a book – the book of that wedding moment. It isn't helpful to stop after each movement or sequence, each word or each sentence to ask what it all means, but if I pay attention somatically to a situation, meaning may become apparent as I reach the end of the improvisation, just as it does when I reach the end of a chapter.

Or I may need to wait until the end of the book.

The meaning *I* find won't, of course, be the same as the meaning *you* find. The meaning and the reading are personally and culturally specific and my position during the moving will have been that of involved-witness-within-the-story rather than detached reader or observer. As I move, I can receive a reflection of my own contribution to the situation; this helps me to feel the impact that I am having on that situation and to take responsibility for co-creating the moment as it unfolds.

The joy of movement, in my experience, is that bodily impressions and expressions can be so multilayered, so vectored and textured: lateral, horizontal, vertical, sagittal, inner, outer, cyclical. In one moment so much happens. The strata of an embodied situation and the paradoxes or conflicting interests within that situation or within myself can be received and acknowledged in such a short space of time, each overlaying the other. Acceptance and transformation take longer! My experience is that, over time, movement reading in daily life cultivates a positive flexibility of attitude and expands my capacity to tolerate paradox and difference. It also offers me a broader, more systemic view of the moment of which I am a part – I can be aware of more of the layers and folds.

Movement reading as a performer allows me to be aware in each moment of my own constellation and of my part within the group constellation. Active and passive both have a part to play in movement reading. I am 'active' when I initiate choices for my own constellation and 'passive' as I receive my position within the group

constellation. I use the word 'constellation' as it carries a sense of three dimensions and textures for me, while 'composition' creates a two-dimensional image in my mind. Maintaining an awareness of constellation gives me the opportunity to create a fresh and refreshed response in the improvisation by following a different impulse or by moving differently.

Just as I may choose to break a verbal habit and say something different or in a new way to a friend in a conversation that seems to be entering a grindingly familiar and unhelpful impasse, so too I can choose to move differently, to play with time and space through my use of rhythm (moving faster) or my direction/position in the space (moving into the centre for a moment if I normally hover on the edges, or walking backwards...). This opens up a whole new vocabulary of possible relationships in that moment.

*I moved, receiving the atmosphere of friendship and love, my hands briefly taking the shape of **Dhyana-mudra**, the west-facing mudra of meditation at Borobudur, which I also associate with receiving and accepting. I shaped my body in relation to the wonderful wooden lattice work of the yurt, and felt the texture of the canvas all around me, with the wind outside on the clifftop. I smelt the fragrance of my Javanese perfume and of the carpets and matting, I remembered to breathe, feeling the fluidity of letting go as I breathed out and consciously released my elbow and wrist joints, often points of tension in my own movement patterns. I entered the sensory fullness of the situation, literally seeing, hearing and sensing the situation from many angles, perspectives and points of view.*

A sense of context seems to be key to an awareness that recognises both myself and my present circumstances. This is the threshold of awareness between my inner landscape and the external landscape, as they mutually attract one another. It offers the space, literally, in terms of movement practice, to become momentarily less attached to the experience of myself as being at the centre of things, and to feel myself simply as a part of the life around me. This, in turn, with practice, can lead to a movement, an action that is as appropriate to the context as it is to my personal needs. So I practise being 'among' and giving equal value to my own movement, to the movement in the environment and to the movement of others I am with.

At one point, I stepped gently backwards, little steps releasing the tension in my ankles, and I remembered one of my very first lessons on my first trip to Java. I had plucked up the courage to ask Prapto why he had hardly given me any verbal feedback or encouragement

over the six weeks or so, when I had been so longing to hear a “bagus” (good) or “bagus sekali” (very good) from him, which he often said as others were moving. By then I had exhausted my entire movement repertoire in an attempt to elicit some praise – Grotowski-based physical theatre, mindfulness pacing and meditation, relaxation exercises, moving meridians... – Prapto asked me to stand, to walk backwards and to pay attention to the feeling in my ankles: “Please make less the hoping”. His invitation has stayed with me all my life. In that moment on my wedding day, I relaxed my hoping once more and touched a feeling of utter satisfaction with, and groundedness in, the present moment. I was present in the presence of the wedding gathering, surefooted and free. We were all part of this traditional situation called ‘wedding’ and I had dared to offer my dance.

Perhaps, just possibly, one day I could create a movement so appropriate to my being-in-context and so in time or in tune with the needs of the situation, that I create no *kamma*² for myself or for the others. I leave no reaction behind me and thus create no history to condition a possible future. There I go, hoping again...

Although my intention had been to dance briefly for my new husband, suddenly, in the process of letting go into the movement, I needed to give thanks and to acknowledge the new constellation of our family: his son and daughter and their partners, my brother and my mother. I looked at each of them, one by one, attuning to my sense of their being in that moment and entering a dialogue with that quality through my movement. The rhythm and the quality of my movement shifted each time, my gestures and facial expressions adapted in response to a change of wavelength, a different resonance. Somewhere my brain was chattering away: “For heaven’s sake! don’t forget anyone, now you’ve started this”, but my embodied self was assured and consistent as she danced this ritual of the wedding dancer. Letting go or offering is the sense of the south-facing **Warasudra** at Borobudur and I allowed that sense of release to permeate my body as I danced, entering different landscapes of being without losing the ‘fact’ of the yurt on the cliff.

I don’t perceive the body and the mind as a duality and I don’t

² **Kamma** or **karma**: *kamma*: “causes which are the life-affirming activities produced by body, speech and mind (...) The Process of Becoming (*bhava*) consists of an active and conditioning *kamma* process (*kamma-bhava*), and of its result, the Rebirth Process (*upapatti-bhava*)”. (Nyanatiloka Mahathera 1967, 21) In this case I mean that I would I leave no reaction behind me and thus create no history to condition a possible future.

experience the body as a medium for expressing psychological realities; it is – and expresses – the very fabric of our being. Tim Ingold refers to a similar experience of self:

“when you yell in anger, the yell **is** your anger, it is not a vehicle that carries your anger [...] the echoes of the yell are the reverberations of your own being as it pours forth into the environment.”

In the same way, each person's movement *is* who they are. It isn't a vehicle to *carry* who they are or a *representation* of who they are. So, the more clearly I can receive someone's condition through movement, the more clearly I can receive who they are in that moment. (I say 'receive' not 'see' – Prapto uses the Indonesian word *menerima* – as it leaves room for perception through any of the senses and for passive as well as active awareness.)

“The Buddha could not see a lasting indestructible soul. In other words, he could locate no abiding soul in this ever-changing being.” (Piyadassi Thera 1981, 28)

According to this belief, the person present in any given moment is, in fact, the only one that there is to receive or be received. This doesn't ignore the reality of repetition, habits and characteristic tendencies in each of us – things that give the impression of a fixed self. But it bears witness to each of us as a constantly evolving being with the potential both for making infinite choices and for transformation in the present moment.

Just as the environment is as it is at any given moment, containing both traces of the past and seeds of the future within its present 'presencing', so the present movement of each of us is as it is, embodying past conditionings within present circumstances. How each movement evolves in the present moment will condition each person's possible futures. It is this attitude to the moving 'organism-in-the-environment' that informs my practice of ecological movement. Implicit in this view is the idea of transformation as an ongoing process.

When it came to my mother, I found myself moving down to the ground and offering a deep bow in a moment of public thanks to her for bringing me into this world and for all her care and nourishment over the years. I remembered some of my father's last words to me: "Look after your mother" and inwardly acknowledged his being



*within my bow. At the same time my body remembered touching the earth as my witness, which is the sense of **Bhumisparca-mudra**, the east-facing mudra at Borobudur that I had spent many hours moving with.*

Finally, I turned to face Andrew and could offer him my embodied vows, held in the crucible of our family and friends. To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, 'till death do us part...the traditional vows stretching back through time.

Epilogue

In my wedding dance I found two intertwined threads of practice arising out of my encounter with Amerta Movement. One is an ongoing research into the relationship of movement to Theravadan Buddhist philosophy and practice, articulated here through the embodiment of a mudra practice, which Prapto has shared with many of us at Borobudur over the years. The other is the practice of 'guiding through movement', be it guiding myself in a life situation or a student in a workshop setting. I've talked about the mudras and want to say a little more about guiding to close this chapter.

Around 1987, when I did my first workshop with one of Prapto's early student/colleagues, Susanka Christmann, I was astonished by her capacity to stimulate sustained transformation in the movement patterns of myself and other participants by moving with them rather than through verbal instruction.

This *guiding* of movement through movement made utter sense to me the moment I experienced it, although terms like somatic, kinaesthetic empathy and mirror neurons were as yet unknown to me. Guiding is a dynamic, somatic mode of attention³ that attends to a situation in motion, acknowledging time and context. For that reason I talk about an 'ecological body' as a 'body-in-movement-in-a-changing-environment'. The emphasis is on viewing the world through a lens of transition or flux, from movement and constant change rather than viewing/receiving movement through a static lens.

As a movement guide, I am trained to perceive through my senses (including my kinaesthetic sense) the patterns and tendencies in a person's movement/attitude as well as to notice the phenomenon of change itself by practising frequently in nature and at times in the bustle of the marketplace or urban settings. The changing of the light, the rhythm of the waves, the rustling of bamboo, the blinking eyes of a goat, the coming and goings of pedestrians...

'Moving with' someone, whether in direct physical contact with them or not, I pay profound attention to the other's being-in-movement within the environment and I move with my whole body's response to that experience (instinctively, intuitively and empathically), without forgetting my own movement or my own tendencies and needs in the evolving situation. Bringing my professional and creative skills with me into the situation, I enter the process of 'movement reading'.

I don't 'do anything to' the other; rather I offer my sequence of movements into the space, so that, if useful they can be a stimulus for them. Often, attentive to their own movement, the other mover is not visually aware of the movements that I am making. If I forget my own movement while I am reading the other's movement, pulled by the desire to 'teach' them something, my experience is that I become too focused on a result, my perspective becomes too narrow and I exclude a respect for the unknown. Once again, I enter the realm of hoping rather than just being with what is. By clinging to some idea that may have already passed, I can fall out of presence and of being present. My impression of guiding is of an open-ended, creative conversation with the other as I move to create the conditions for a shared landscape with them in which I can stimulate the growth of their movement life and be stimulated by their responses.

3 **Somatic modes of attention** – "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas 1993, 138).

Movement is always contextual. In fact, guiding for me connects with the mudras at Borobudur in that the practice demands a cultivation of qualities of perceiving, witnessing, receiving, letting go, offering and making less the fear. It often feels challenging to allow myself to be seen in that emergent process, as, similar to the wedding dance, I never know in advance the form that the movement will take, or whether it will be helpful or congruent. I remember similar feelings when I first opened my practice as a Shiatsu practitioner – despite all the training, all the skills, all the diagnostic tools, when it came to the moment would I really be able to offer something for the other’s wellbeing through my being-in-touch?

In my own life, be it in conversation with a friend, at a wedding or at a deathbed, I have come step by step to trust the process of guiding myself (and, at times, others) through a dynamic awareness of movement within the changing moment, as I bow to the unknown.

This role of facilitating an experience of ‘involved witness’, whether in moving, witnessing, speaking, praying or making music and singing, is now called *gardening* by Prapto, rather than teaching or guiding. For myself, in a Western context, I still refer to ‘teaching’ and ‘guiding’ but I am practising to maintain an attitude of ‘gardening’ in every area of my life.

~ ~ ~

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