

Entering not-knowing

Psychotherapy and the value of embodied spiritual development in the Discipline of
Authentic Movement

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I. The spiritual dimension

As I dance, especially in my many years of practicing the Discipline of Authentic Movement, time and again I experience states of great clarity, coherence and wholeness. They are neither accompanied by personal emotions, nor can they be derived or understood from my life's story. Nevertheless they are highly meaningful. I experience myself as present, consciously grounded in the body, profoundly grateful and "in accordance with the invisible,"(1) tasting the deeper source of our being and of life itself. The relationship to my individual difficulties and also to those of my clients expands toward an attitude of stronger compassion with what is: Acceptance, trust and hope.

The moment when my teacher, Janet Adler, addressed me on this topic is rooted in my memory. I imagine that she wanted to be sure that there were adequately developed ego-functions, so that I could receive these transpersonal experiences without being flooded by them. At the same time, through the quality of her witness and resonance with my movement, I felt deeply seen in a dimension which I call "spiritual" today. Clients are also supported by the embodiment of this state of consciousness in accompanying the injuries of their personal history in an increasingly aware and loving way – and in experiencing themselves in a larger connectedness.

Saying "yes" to the spiritual dimension of our humanness has fundamentally influenced and greatly enriched my life and my work as a dance and body-based psychotherapist. Hence I want to encourage remembering this healing force in the field of western psychotherapy and connecting it with its accomplishments in supporting ego-development, and in solving self-limiting symptoms and interpersonal problems.

The term "spiritual" is frequently used, and is understood in a wide variety of ways, so that in an exchange about it, we are sometimes talking past each other. Here, I am referring in particular to an inner direct experience of oneness, a state mystics of many wisdom traditions have described. It is an experience of nonduality, in contrast to the belief in an external God that is separate from me. (2) This state can arise spontaneously, for instance, in nature, in sexuality, through the use of mind-altering substances, or while dancing. It also can arise after years of cultivating certain states of concentration in meditation or through the development of an embodied inner witness in the Discipline of Authentic Movement. (3)

In this state of consciousness that is so difficult to grasp with conceptual language, "the blessing of clear, silent awareness can become known." (4) When this experience is guided with mindfulness and is held within awareness, it can have such a deep impact that it widens and transforms the development of personality toward authenticity, compassion and altruism. This could also be described as a being-in-the-world, that is conscious of its self and at the same time is aware of and feels responsible for more than the personality by consciously embracing others, the environment and life in all its expressions.

From the very beginning of time, humans have searched for and found this direct experience of the numinous in the medium of dance. It is here that the body is experienced as an instrument, a conduit and a vessel. Direct experience finds its expression in the body, through the body and because of the body.

The body is closer to an all-encompassing level of consciousness than the intellect. The intellect limits, it segments reality into partial aspects, with which it concerns itself, one by one. The body, on the other hand, can open itself to wholeness. Therefore it is used in all religions as a vehicle into the transmental space of consciousness – in almost all religions, because in Christianity, we have forgotten this spiritual power of the body. The body is always the base. It is in a way the vessel, in which the encounter with the godly truth is held. (5)

I hold the view that this potential of feeling whole dancing and the human longing for being whole is one essential, often hidden, reason why many people turn toward body-oriented psychotherapy and dance therapy. Dance therapy, my point of psychotherapeutic reference in this article, offers this inherent aspect of dance by virtue of its subject. For that reason alone, I consider it meaningful to open a space inside oneself as a dance therapist and to create outside in the therapeutic situation a holding environment, in which this sometimes overwhelming experience can arise and be accompanied consciously. I believe that dance therapists are well prepared for this. The differentiated knowledge of movement, behaviour and psychodynamic development, the bodily experienced knowledge of the correlation of body, emotion, psyche and mind and the training to go into subtle conscious attunement with clients through their own bodies, are important prerequisites. They support dance therapists in accompanying people processing and embracing their personal suffering as well as in staying aware in the presence of direct experience, which goes beyond our everyday consciousness. Dance and body-based psychotherapists can make a vitally important contribution in perceiving both as interwoven and mutually enriching.

In that case this spiritual dimension can extend the classical psychotherapeutic goals and serve another important purpose: The development toward a more comprehensive self, that contains the ego but isn't limited to it, thus enlarging ego-identity toward the development of a wider consciousness beyond personality and toward presence and compassion.

The Discipline of Authentic Movement, one specific branch of the major domain of Authentic Movement, offers an evolving path that prepares, practices and, in moments of grace, opens practitioners to this development in relationship with the re-adoption of unresolved personal trauma and suffering.

An embodied mystical practice, which invites the possibility of transformation into new ways of knowing, must include the light and shadow of personality to become integrated into a contemporary life. (6)

II. Qualities of the inner witness

Seen from the reverse perspective, psychotherapy, which invites the possibility of self-investigation into new ways of seeing oneself, should acknowledge and further the realm of the soul to transform contemporary life. The highly esteemed psychotherapeutic concept of facilitating the development of autonomy should nowadays be balanced by the development of a consciousness that sensitizes to that which carries us – a deeper reality of belonging.

The inner observer makes an important contribution for connecting and developing autonomy and belonging. Moreover, commitment to the emergence of the inner observer increasingly creates an interface between psychotherapeutic and spiritual approaches. Often I recognize in my psychotherapeutic work the healing force of a compassionate inner observer. I support its development, for example, through the introduction of the Discipline of Authentic Movement. In this context, the inner observer is characterized by certain qualities and is referred to as the *inner witness*. The therapist is called the *outer witness* and the client is called the *mover*. In the following I will illustrate qualities of the inner witness using the word “mover” as interchangeable with “client” and “outer witness” as interchangeable with “therapist.”

In the dyadic form of Authentic Movement, the mover closes her (7) eyes and, in the presence of the outer witness, turns her attention inward. Now she tries to follow the movement impulses which appear, to dwell into the arising body sensations, emotions, images and thoughts while being aware of them. After moving, she opens her eyes and, in the presence of the outer witness, goes into resonance with the movement process through language. In remembering and naming her movements and the areas of perception that accompanied them, consciousness about the experience becomes possible. This is an invitation for the mover to move toward a coherent relationship with her experience. This relationship contains the potential for integration.

A mover speaks about her personal process:

I am standing on both feet in the space, sensing a strong pull toward the space behind me.

Step by step I walk backwards, feeling an intense insecurity.

I shiver

*The image of a scale appears. A scale, which balances itself, so as to find its balance point. I pause,
I shift my weight from right to left, right to left.*

I balance myself

Then I continue walking backwards, step by step. I feel a huge desire to let myself drop to the ground. At the same time, I feel an intense fear to let myself drop down.

I stay with the fear and listen inside

At the same instant I recognise “It is good, that I feel fear; it somehow belongs to me - here.”

It feels complete and true and I continue walking backwards

I stand and equilibrate myself until I am completely in balance.

I feel a peaceful calmness in me and deep contentment. (8)

A sudden insight appears by speaking the experience and listening to the words of her witness. The mover exclaims that, for several years, she had to lie in a body cast at night after a heavy fall on her back at the age of four. Later she speaks about being very glad to have experienced her long-time fear of falling as belonging to her as a child, to have appreciated it and to have integrated this through an embodied consciousness into the context of her life's story. (9)

This example also describes the qualities of a reliable inner companion, the inner witness. Thus the mover is conscious of all areas of perception of her embodied experience:

Movement: *I am standing on my two feet.*

Sensation: *I sense a strong pull.*

Emotion: *I feel an intense insecurity.*

Image: *The image of a scale appears.*

Thought: *It is good, that I experience fear, it somehow belongs to me – here.*

This development of continuous, simultaneous attention of everything, that happens at any one moment in the body while directly participating in it, creates a common basis of the inner witness. This goes together with an emerging inner attitude of acceptance and openness, which is as free as possible of interpretation and judgment. In this way the mover practices mindfulness. “*I pause and listen inside.*”

Mindfulness while fully participating in movement, sensation, emotion and association allows this mover to go into an empathic dialogic relationship with her fearful experience. This enables her to follow it internally and to contain it by herself. She becomes the witness of her own experience. “*At the same time, I experience a strong fear of letting myself drop to the ground.*”

Witnessing and holding one's own suffering with mindfulness is connected with a growing ability to discern which impulses she wants to fulfill. “*I feel the strong desire to let myself drop to the ground. At the same time, I feel an intense fear of letting myself drop to the ground. - I stay with the fear and listen inside.*”

Now the freedom of choice becomes a potential, empowering this mover to be able to act in a self-conscious way. She's not bound to her experience from the past any longer. “*I stand and equilibrate myself until I am completely in balance.*”

While coming completely in balance this mover descends deeper: “*I feel a peaceful calmness within me and deep contentment.*” This moment describes a shift from mindfulness into awareness, and into a totally different space of perception. In this sense mindfulness aims more towards the ego becoming aware of itself. The ego becomes more aware of what I do, what I sense, what I feel. Thus, the essential aspect of mindfulness is the birth of the inner witness becoming more and more kind. Yet, in this moment, the mover is conscious of awareness. She is only aware. There is no story, no comment. The inner witness becomes still. She simply is.

In the Discipline of Authentic Movement, these intrapersonal qualities of the inner witness develop within and because of the relationship to the outer witness. The outer witness serves as a model as far as she has developed a compassionate inner witness in herself and connects through it with the mover in a loving, accepting and compassionate way. This interpersonal relationship builds the core and shapes the development of one’s inner witness.

III. Developing trust in not-knowing: Developing embodied witness consciousness

With an increasing trust in the inner witness, the *conscious body* develops. A differentiated “sensing awareness” (10) has unfolded, while the mover distracts herself less and less with mundane thoughts, ideas or internal criticism. In a mindful and concentrated way, she is attentive to everything that emerges during the moving process. Trust in the body becomes possible, without knowing where the movement will lead. This allows for *trust in the Unknown and trust in not-knowing.* (11)

To dwell in a conscious body as home also means that each body part and each movement can be a doorway to deepening awareness through “systematic development of the ability to concentrate.” (12) The mover fully enters into the constantly changing experiences in movement and body. This goes along with or alternates with a focused concentration, which stays with just this movement, this feeling, and descends even more into it, accepting it as it is.

So the *conscious body* invites *presence* through the art of concentration. In moments of presence there is no language, no inner dialogue. The inner witness is solely conscious presence. Movers experience/sense this in the body as if all pores open and the boundaries become more fluid expanding into wide and open space. Being free from associations, thoughts or emotions, they experience a shift from personality into presence, “as though arriving in a clearing.” (13) In experiencing *presence*, trust in the unknown becomes *entrusting oneself to the unknown.*

Presence stands in close relationship to *direct experience*. In these indescribable moments of non-duality the body is permeable to energetic phenomena and becomes a vessel or a conduit for a universal energetic intelligence, that “concentrates within and moves through the conscious body deeply contributing to experience of wholeness.” (14) This is often connected with a perception of being precisely aligned and of perceiving the body as a form that is experienced as transparent or as

filled from within. The mover “is moved.” (15) She abandons herself to be centered by the movement until she is one with this movement, this form. In other moments she experiences a direct hit by the numinous, an experience of oneness with all that is or with the indwelling God within us. “The felt separation between the moving self and the more familiar experience of the inner witness dissolves” (16) and develops into witness consciousness. In moments of *direct experience*, entrusting oneself to the unknown opens up *to consciously giving oneself over to the unknown – to surrender oneself to not-knowing.*

Surrendering oneself to the unknown can feel like dying, as we let go of our identity of everyday life. The vulnerability that goes along with this speaks of our authentic strength. Like Janet Adler, (17) I know these moments of being unified as moments of grace, since they cannot be reached by will. They completely capture us and let us be filled with amazement, awe and humility. Consciousness develops toward an intuitive inner knowing and insight. A widening and deepening of the human capacity to feel compassion evolves.

Direct experience often is accompanied by a *descent into awareness*. The mover lets herself be led further into deep silence, timelessness and open space. Some movers descend into what they describe as the formless, infinite force, that always was and eternally is, a direct experience of emptiness. On a bodily level there occurs a profound calming down of body reactions and of the nervous system. Breathing becomes less and soft. Some are aware of a free falling and of a dissolution of their body boundaries. This is followed by a profound serenity. The blessing of clear silent awareness can become known - the Witness.

Clear silent awareness is perceived as the field and the background within which all experience exists.

And here, even the union of the heart subsides into a ground of being that is so simple: It is that place “where distinction never gazed”, as Meister Eckhart called it, where even oneness makes no sense, where the mind of insight has fallen silent, where the heart has fallen silent, and there is just a resting in the simple ground of being. (18)

IV. Taking responsibility for our own lives: Therapeutic effects and consequences

Therapists who have developed a compassionate inner witness and have opened themselves to presence have the capacity to recognize these experiences in their clients. If they do not, transpersonal experiences may, for example, be mistaken for a regression into the pre-personal and irrational stage of development of a baby, which is pre-consciously merged with everything. This reduction of the experience pathologizes the client. It inhibits understanding and integration into the Self. This mistake can also happen the other way round. In this case the therapist inflates fantasies of omnipotence or psychotic experience to experiences of wholeness. Ken Wilber calls this

interpretation a pre/trans confusion. (19) If the therapist is able to distinguish transpersonal experiences from personal experiences, then it becomes a delicate therapeutic task to support a conscious relationship to their blessings as well as to their challenges, and to accompany its consolidation.

It is possible that the client may feel inflated in her ego because of the extraordinary experience. In this case the ego tries to grasp or to own the experience by imagining that it belongs to her alone. As this effect occurs the therapist supports the client by paying attention to clarity between the experience beyond personality and the reaction of the personality to it, and to bring light to unconscious belief systems or unresolved life patterns. Otherwise the client's ego can be narcissistically affirmed, which doesn't serve developing a humble relationship to that which is given.

Alternatively, the client may believe that she now has complete understanding and is instantly healed because of the direct experience. By this response transpersonal states are unconsciously adopted as a form of resistance to facing one's own individual suffering, and as an avoidance of working through emotional pain. This spiritual bypassing of personal suffering is very common and all too human. The therapist brings awareness to it and again invites the client to work on herself and to recognize that these indescribable experiences serve as an impulse that calls us to take responsibility for our own lives fully – embracing both joy and pain.

Another misconception is to understand an experience of wholeness in itself as the final goal by taking the accompanying side-effects, such as catharsis from a stressful life, well-being and bliss, as all it has to offer. This perspective doesn't serve the further development toward a widening of consciousness which becomes embodied in everyday life. If this side-effect appears, the client strongly longs for repeated spiritual experiences, and loses relationship to herself as well as to others by escaping from this world with its daily demands to a state of consciousness that she considers better. It is often sufficient if therapists are conscious of this ego response and accompany the client in becoming aware of it without blaming her, and support groundedness in the body, in relationships and daily life again. Buddhism and other spiritual traditions, which have explored the development of consciousness and spirit in detail, know this side-effect as one kind of attachment. In psychology it is known as a behaviour of dependency. It is here, as well as in the examples above, where psychological and spiritual knowledge come together and enrich each other.

Together, psychological and spiritual knowledge help us to deal with an experience that is so markedly different from the common dualistic worldview of cause and effect, object and subject as well as from the perspectives and paradigms of our own loved ones. They offer a way to deal with the longing to integrate into a contemporary western life with integrity and from the heart. Participation in groups of people committed to truth, to rooting an awareness practice into daily life, to be in nature, to become still, can be part of anchoring oneself consistently into the realm of a deeper reality.

Trust in the process itself is helpful while deepening one's commitment with earnestness to a practice such as the Discipline of Authentic Movement. Spiritual development as well as ego-development seem to follow an inherent order towards becoming what we actually are.

For many this is an ongoing process. A spiritual teacher as well as a therapist who are committed companions are helpful time and again, meeting with the client in this space.

V. Conclusion

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there.

– Rumi

Rumi has named this interrelational space of unity consciousness and of this simple ground of being. It is here where spiritual experience opens a new space for psychotherapy. If we as therapists can meet our clients in this open field of not-knowing, then we may become increasingly able to devote fully to ourselves and to the client – to turn towards ourselves, and turn toward the other – by attending to our souls and by letting ourselves be touched deeply within our open souls, so that the other can be held therein. The therapeutic willingness becomes increasingly wide-spread, capable of being with intense feelings such as sheer despair, helplessness, solitude, loss and the existential fear of dying and death, and to hold even this with the client and within ourselves with awareness, not looking for supposed answers and solutions that ultimately do not exist. Because when we as therapists expose ourselves to not-knowing, we recognize our own fear of losing control, our fear of dissolution and of groundlessness, our fear of death; and here we realize that we are in fact just fellow humans. We all experience life with all its beauty and all its heavy loads. Here is where we are the same and fully turn towards each other meeting in our wholeness and in our brokenness.

Empathy turns into wide-spread compassion and growing compassion toward the client develops. This deepens the compassion of the clients toward themselves and supports the work with personal pain. The pain does not change, but the relationship with it can be characterized by increasing acceptance and compassion toward one's own suffering. As the heart cracks open, as the soul is acknowledged and heard, we become able to turn towards our pain.

It is my hope and my experience that the heartfelt soul doesn't need to detach and dissociate from the tremendous personal suffering as well as from the outburst of suffering in our world nowadays. The ego alone can't bear this. Commitment to the development of a consciousness with loving awareness at the bottom can hold this while we bow down with humility, in front of that which we call God, this loving intelligence, that we cannot grasp.

*There's a blaze of light in every word.
It doesn't matter which you heard
the holy or the broken hallelujah*

*And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of song,
with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah*

– Leonard Cohen

With deep gratitude to Janet Adler

Notes and References

- (1) Peter Schellenbaum. *Im Einverständnis mit dem Wunderbaren*. München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003.
- (2) Ken Wilber; *Integral Spirituality*. Shambala Publications, 2007, chapter 3. p. 111-112. The experience is differentiated into states of gross, subtle, causal, being a witness, non-dual and absolute.
- (3) Janet Adler. *Official website of Circles of Four: The Mandorla and the Discipline of Authentic Movement*. 2013
- (4) Janet Adler. *Offering from the Conscious Body: The Discipline of Authentic Movement*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002. Preface XIX
- (5) Willigis Jäger. *Die Welle ist das Meer - The wave is the ocean*. Freiburg, Herder, 2008. 128
- (6) Janet Adler. *Official website of Circles of Four: The Mandorla and the Discipline of Authentic Movement*. 2013. 1.
- (7) When the text employs feminine pronouns, both female and male are indicated.
- (8) personal communication , seminar 2010
- (9) personal communication, seminar 2010
- (10) Peter Schellenbaum. *Im Einverständnis mit dem Wunderbaren*. München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003. 47.
- (11) Some movers already come with trust in their inner witness embodied through this deep trust in the moving body. They seem never to have lost this primal wisdom. Others bring it out of intensive body, movement or dance training. In my experience, methods that address in depth body and movement awareness as well as improvisation facilitate this sensitive process-oriented embodied awareness.
- (12) Jack Kornfield. *Das weise Herz - The wise heart*. München, Goldmann Arkana, 2008. 447.
- (13) Janet Adler. *Official website of Circles of Four: The Mandorla and the Discipline of Authentic Movement*. 2013.6
- (14) Janet Adler. *Offering from the Conscious Body: The Discipline of Authentic Movement*.

Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002. Preface VIII , p. 206

- (15) Mary Starks Whitehouse. The tao of the body. In Patrizia Pallaro (Ed.), *Authentic Movement: Essays by Mary Starks Whitehouse, Janet Adler and Joan Chodorow, Vol. 1.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publisher, 1999. pp.43-50. (Original work published in 1958).
- (16) Janet Adler. *Offering from the Conscious Body: The Discipline of Authentic Movement.* Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002. 206
- (17) personal communication 2012
- (18) Adyashanti. *Tanzende Leere - Emptiness dancing.* München Goldmann Arkana, 2007. 255
- (19) Ken Wilber. *Integral Spirituality.* Shambala Publications, 2007. 81