

Authentic Movement as a Meditative Practice

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This article will examine the form of Authentic Movement as a meditative practice. Both authors address the intersection between Authentic Movement and meditation by addressing areas of overlap and integration. Entering into the practice of Authentic Movement is conceptualized as moving into an experience of tabula rasa. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1979) defines tabula rasa as “the mind before it received the impressions gained from experience.” That open and potentiated state of being allows for the unfolding and experiencing of all that is possible and evolves out of the simplicity of the relationship between mover/s and witness/es and the embodied understanding that comes from that subjective inter-relationship. Authentic Movement then is a disciplined practice of moving, witnessing and talking about the experience between moving and witnessing that is articulated, conscious, and embodied. Janet Adler (2002) describes this as “the conscious development of relationships between the moving self and the inner witness, between the individual body and the collective body, between the self and the Divine” (p. xix).

Meditation here is considered in terms of ways of making the mind full of the moment while cultivating the witness function of the inner observer (Franklin, 1999). Both Authentic Movement and meditation make skillful use of mindfulness and witnessing by tracking various qualities of movement within the body-mind-spirit connection.

The Form of Authentic Movement

The form of Authentic Movement practiced by Marcow-Speiser has evolved since the early 1980’s out of the seminal work of Janet Adler. This developing work has also been

influenced by Mary Starks Whitehouse whose collected essays are found in Pallaro (1999). Janet Adler (2002) is viewed widely as the “keeper” of the form and the sacred nature and commitment of her work has influenced the practice of the form. She believes that: “The discipline is always continuing to evolve because of each person who enters it and because of each teacher who offers from her own developing perspective” (p. xix).

Entering into the realm of Authentic Movement is to enter into the realm of the great unknown. It is not possible to predict what will emerge as the mover/s begin to move in the presence of the witness/es. Moving into the empty space in the practice of Authentic Movement is like moving into the space of infinite possibility and as such contains the potentiality of all human experiencing. It is not possible to know what will happen in this in-between realm that exists between mover/s and witness/es. Authentic Movement can only occur in the presence of another. The mover, likely moving with eyes closed, is always moving in relationship to at least one witness. This dynamic of the witness moves the practice into an in-between realm, where personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal elements are brought into play.

Authentic Movement skillfully integrates the practice of moving and witnessing. Movers are invited to move with eyes closed following their inner impulses and associations. Witnesses watch with eyes open and respond to the mover/s movement by following their own internal flow of impulses and associations in response to the movement. After movers finish moving for a specified and agreed upon time frame, movers share their thoughts and feelings and witnesses respond.

Both mover and witness are tasked with following the flow of their impulses and associations. As mover, the movement emanates from a variety of sources. Sometimes the movement comes from the personal body narrative, sometimes from sensation, sometimes from a place that is known and can be named, and sometimes from a place beyond words. For some movers, moving into the Authentic Movement space involves a process of surrendering into the movement. Oftentimes this process of surrender means letting go of resistance, distracting thoughts, feelings, sensations or issues that surface

and need to be acknowledged and brought to conscious awareness, so that the channels of attention are cleared. Sometimes moving into Authentic Movement means not moving at all. What is not clear at the time often becomes illuminated when mover/s and witness/es share.

There are various rituals for beginning and ending the Authentic Movement session. Ideally Authentic Movement takes place in an empty room with as little distraction as possible. Moving with eyes closed is sometimes unpredictable and as much as possible the ideal space should contain very few other materials so that movers are not tempted to engage with extraneous physical objects or clutter.

Generally, witnesses sit or stand around the edges of the circle, symbolically holding and marking the movement space and generally movers move into the empty space between mover/s and witness/es. Sometimes movers and witnesses sit or stand together in the circle establishing eye contact before the movement starts. Sometimes they reach their arms out to each other to signal their readiness to begin the process. Generally, all participants view the empty space between them before moving begins. Sometimes the movement begins from a stationary position and sometimes from a walking circle. Before the movement begins, an agreed upon time for moving is established. In the case of a group, an agreed upon number of witnesses are decided upon. When there is more than one witness participating in a session there becomes a “circle” of witnesses and when there is more than one mover there becomes a “circle” of movers. Before the movement starts in the case of a group, the group decides whether there will be an open or closed circle. In an open group session, movers may alternate between moving and witnessing so that they can move in and out and join the witnessing circle when they have finished moving. In a closed circle, the group decides on a fixed number of movers or witnesses and members elect whether they will move or witness in the session. For purposes of safety all participants know that they can open their eyes at any time and that they can stop moving and freely join the witness circle. When the time is up a chime or bell is often used to signal the end of the session.

The mover/s are encouraged to try to make eye contact with their witness/es before they begin and when they emerge from moving. When mover/s and witness/es follow this form there is an interweaving of a connection that is tangible, repetitive and predictable. Generally transition time takes place before mover/s and witness/es begin to verbally process their experience. Sometimes participants draw or journal their experience prior to talking about it. All of these ritualistic elements are clearly articulated and agreed upon prior to the commencement of the session. They provide for safety continuity between sessions and containment of the otherwise uncontrollable unknown potential of what can occur in the experience.

Authentic Movement as a Meditation Practice

Authentic Movement has many contemplative aspects that are similar to traditional meditative practices. For example the invitation to become mindfully embodied and also subjectively reflective fosters contemplative awareness characteristic of both disciplines. In Authentic Movement, the practice of non-judgmental awareness of the community of movers builds personal and interpersonal somatic attention (Avstreich, 2006). Awareness, which is a form of attention and focus (Trungpa, 1996), is an essential part of the witness function in meditative practice and also in other art forms such as Authentic Movement. Bringing awareness to the quality and kind of experience alive within the body and one's community invites a wakeful presence to manifest around internal and external stimulus-response loops. These loops can originate from social exchanges, neurobiological urges, or cognitive processes such as memories or sensory based perceptions (Hannaford, 1995). A goal of Authentic Movement is to teach conscious participation as an observer or witness and to thoughtfully engage in the unfolding of these reflective and reflexive cycles. When these body-based cycles are listened to, contemplated, and completed, the result can yield an integrated body, mind, and spirit connection for the practitioner. When somatic messages, such as pain are ignored illness can result. Over time, Authentic Movement invites the mover and witness to no longer discount the intelligence alive in the body that is seeking recognition and to listen to these somatic and sensory based communications.

Attempting to authentically move in the presence of a witness supports the radical gesture of “just being” in the present moment. The invitation exists for that which wants to move to move. Once engaged in this process of authentic motion, the possibility to receive the wisdom generated from the process and carefully consider its guiding message is set in motion. Mindfulness practice (making the mind full of the fleeting moment) allows for wisdom to emerge from the self awareness generated from these ordinary moment to moment experiences.

The Witness in Meditation

Authentic Movement synergistically divides and skillfully utilizes the two roles of mover and witness. The connection to sitting meditation practice is significant. In meditation, what is moving in the mind or body is also simultaneously witnessed by the one engaged in the practice. In Authentic Movement, the mover is also seen by another member of the group serving as witness. In sitting meditation the goal is to become the witness of the thinking mind. The witness function in meditation is a vast topic that elucidates the very heart of sitting and Authentic Movement practice. Ancient scriptural texts such as the Upanishads (Prabhavananda and Manchester, 1975), and the Yoga Sutras of Pantanjali (Feuerstein, 1989) beautifully articulate the presence of the inner Witness, the inner knower beyond ego identity. The Sanskrit word *Atman*, which both identifies and stands for this inner Witness presence, is referred to here and in many texts as the Self. The Upanishads is a rich, ancient text that instructs the practitioner on the knowledge and the cultivation of the Self or inner witness (Prabhavananda and Manchester, 1975). With insightful transparency and elusive language, portions of the Upanishads try to convey this indefinable subject.

Among the many scriptural texts of *Kashmir Śhaivism* that address the creative manifestation of movement is the *Spanda-Karikas* (Singh, 1980). Known as the doctrine or stanzas on vibration, the *Spanda Karikas* explicate the understanding that we literally are the universe contemplating itself. Every movement and manifestation within the universe originates ebbs and flows from one ultimate source, which in *Kashmir Śhaivism*, is the *Spanda* principle. *Spanda*, in Sanskrit literally means “throb” and is therefore the

initial movement that begins and supports all creation into its many forms and endless cycles of expansion and contraction (Singh, 1980).

Mindfulness practice, which is a form of meditation, is about trying to openly and skillfully engage in the present moment and observe the *Spanda* phenomenon behind thoughts and sensations. By staying focused on the here and now moment to moment between “indulging and repressing” thoughts we learn to suspend the judgments that are so easily attached to the contents of the mind (Chodron, 1997, p 16). Creating space within the mind to gently receive and hold, rather than grasp whatever thoughts arise is a significant goal of this approach to meditation. Meditation then is about mixing space with the movement of our thoughts, as if providing vast territory for an agitated animal (Trungpa, 1976). Trungpa describes mindfulness as an aspect of meditation that observes and recognizes diverse qualities of experience. Awareness, the other side of the equation, is about the direct discovery of mindfulness (p. 49). He also says that “awareness is the willingness not to cling to the discoveries of mindfulness, and mindfulness is just precision; things are what they are” (p. 50).

The discipline to receive and allow what is without altering meaning is a key component of both meditation and Authentic Movement. Observing our thoughts wherever they travel without contracting around them redefines our relationship with the movements of the discursive mind (Muktananda, 1991). This is the ultimate goal of meditation: to make the mind full of the moving moment while nonjudgmentally witnessing the fluctuations of the thinking mind. Authentic Movement engages and enlarges this quality of attention by merging this presence with motion while being witnessed by another as well as the self.

Similar to the orientation of the phenomenological researcher (Creswell, 1998), witnessing in Authentic Movement requires a suspension of judgment and projection (Betensky, 2001). While movers are observed, the responsible witness notices what comes alive internally, owns the received information, and when appropriate after the movement sequence has stopped, speaks to the mover from this place of felt observation

and connection (Pallaro, 1999). When to speak, how to speak, and what to say to the mover is a practice in itself. A careful inventory of forming thoughts that are about to be offered to another helps to solidify clear speech that is void of self-indulgent projections or tedious questioning.

Clarity of intention is essential if the quality of exchange is to contain meaningful information. As the mover is seen by the witness, the invitation also exists for the witness to see him or herself in the act of observing another. This entire practice of witnessing then moves on a continuum from conscious witnessing to Witness Consciousness (Franklin, 1999). Witness Consciousness is understandably often confused with conscious witnessing. The great teachers and adept contemplatives tell us that in deep states of meditation the ego self dissolves and merges into the expansive eternal soul or *Atman* Self which is the sacred territory of Witness consciousness. Witness consciousness is the ultimate goal, conscious witnessing is how we practice our way to that goal.

Like meditation, Authentic Movement is a disciplined practice. As in meditation, both mover and witness are tracking (not too tight or rigid and not too loose or unfettered) the flow of their own inner thoughts and impulses. In meditation the meditator observes the flow of inner sensation and thought. In both practices there is an exploration of witnessing the unfolding of inner experiences to wherever they will lead.

In meditation, awareness and attention are utilized for coming back into the present moment. In Authentic Movement there is an effort to follow the dominant impulse. There are levels of complexity in the pulls and tugs of consciousness. Within these pulling and tugging sensations there is one theme, or feeling, or sensation, known or unknown that reverberates longest and loudest. Following this thread wherever it will lead refers to following the dominant impulse. It might just be a starting point for something else to occur but it is a starting point for the evolution of what comes next.

This process is akin to the practice of Clearing a Space described in the Focusing work of Eugene Gendlin (1981). For the witness, as for the meditator, the flow of consciousness is contained in the still body or moving body. The still body allows for an entrainment of following the rise and fall of breath and whatever practice the meditator follows for returning to the body and to the breath. In Authentic Movement this concept can be thought of as “ballooning” that occurs in those moments when the witness has disconnected from the mover and needs to bring themselves back into the present. In effect, ballooning is a kind of drifting into an inward space of losing connection to what is going on in the moment. In the body’s constant homeostatic flow from moment to moment there is a “spacing in” and a “spacing out” that occurs that is very functional. In relaxation this beginning of “spacing out” can lead to a non ordinary state of consciousness and in that state of consciousness it is more difficult to be truly present for the mover/s. Therefore the need to keep the “balloon” from drifting out into space and need to pull it, and oneself back into the present. A successful “ballooning” strategy can be to focus at that moment on the mover/s and to notice carefully what is happening in that moment in the movement so that one can precisely discuss and demonstrate what one was thinking, feeling and experiencing when the mover did something very specific. Similarly when one feels oneself “ballooning” as a mover one can sometimes pause in that moment to simply pay attention to what is happening at that moment before moving on.

Suspending Judgment and Owning the Projection

Authentic Movement is meditation in motion. One of the functions of both Authentic Movement and meditation is to bring into awareness that which is inside and outside of the body. This awareness is cultivated with an evolving posture of witnessed and, ideally, suspended judgment. The form, practice and discipline of Authentic Movement cultivates an open mind and body rather than a focus on judgment. What happens is what happens, there are no pre-determined outcomes or objectives. The goal is the simple staying with whatever happens between mover/s and witness/es and bringing that embodied experiencing to consciousness by talking together about what has happened.

As a witness it is extremely important to allow the mover/s to speak first. As the mover/s speak first it is possible for the witness to understand better what the mover/s experience. To hear this and filter it through what one's own experience was at that time helps to cultivate an understanding of personal projections. When offering verbal or artistic feedback to the witness it is important to remember the dictum to do no harm so that one chooses words or expressions with conscious intent. Responsibly acknowledging and holding personal projections fosters compassionate attention and therefore minimizes the possibility of projective harm. There is a delicate balance as one engages in this practice. It is possible that the exchanges between witness and mover can become contaminated with confused observations that came up in the space between mover/s and witness/es. Therefore, it is important to not dilute that significance. It helps to always return to the movement so that one can say something like "when I saw you bending over like this, and I mirror back the movement. I felt that I wanted to reach over and hold your head." And that might leave the mover free to respond, as has happened, that "at that moment I felt a hand holding my head and I knew that I was no longer alone in my pain."

Conclusion

As we begin to unravel the threads of any Authentic Movement session we notice that everything that has happened to anyone present—mover or witness—is part of the larger community of movers. Whatever anyone brings into the group belongs to the group. Sometimes it is not even one's own autobiographical story that one is moving but rather a larger collective narrative. And much as the individual human body is always moving into or out of or towards a state of internal homeostasis so too the group, the collective body and mind, is moving into or out of or towards homeostasis. This practice of Authentic Movement allows the distractions that prevent homeostasis to become noticed and eventually addressed. And in so doing one is taking one's place in what Mary Oliver calls the "family of things" or calling one's spirit home. Jean Houston(2000) describes this process as follows:

By harnessing our individual purpose to a vision of the possible collective future, we pull ourselves out of the mire of stasis and into tomorrow. Our

spirits are called home, and we find heart for the next stage of our evolutionary journey (p.43).

Authentic Movement is a meditative practice. One can only practice this form in the attentive process of another so that one can experience the enormous privilege of calling oneself into an attentiveness and receptivity to whatever unfolds. This non-judgemental form is an attempt to bring to a conscious articulation that which does come into being between witness/es and mover/s. Each time one enters into this form there is the potential for experiencing a gratitude for whatever does emerge into consciousness. Authentic Movement allows one to travel into the present moment, diving deep and surfacing, moving away from and back to the present moment over and over again. It reminds us that what happens to you, happens for me, that we are all connected, that the cries of joy and anguish of the human spirit are universal cries and that together, as in the model of the meditative mind, we can hold and witness whatever surfaces.

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