

Transformative Body Practices and Social Change: The Intersection Between Spirituality and Activism

Don Hanlon Johnson¹

Abstract: This paper examines the intersections of embodied spiritual practices—breathing, sensing, postural awareness, moving, touching—and organizing for social change. The perspectives of two leading revolutionary theorists, Mahatma Gandhi and Wilhelm Reich, provide a basis from which to analyze the importance for body cultivation in addressing social issues. There is an analysis of how traditional practices might be taught in a context which opens the practitioner to the grief of the world and the energy to address it.

Key Words: Somatic Spirituality; Transformative Body Practices; Embodied Spirituality; Social Activism; Mahatma Gandhi; Wilhelm Reich.

The orderly form of this clean title belies the bloody historical conflicts in which various societies have tried to blend spiritual values, physical needs, and social justice. Grand spiritual visions continually veer into a fanaticism which becomes blind to many who are targeted as 'other', even to the point of questioning their humanity. Attention to physical needs collapses into narrow-minded squeezing of the human spirit.

Gandhi knew this. In his long struggles in South Africa and India to invent an Indian identity of freedom and social justice, he kept bumping up against the bitter resentments that turn us against one another even while we desperately seek to join together. It was for this reason that he was virtually obsessed about seemingly minor personal issues of diet, exercise, and sexual control. "It is easier," he wrote, "to conquer the entire world than to subdue the enemies in our body. . . . The self-government which you, I and all the others have to attain is in fact this. . . . The point of it all is that you can serve the country only with the body" (Gandhi as cited in Alter, 2000, p.3).

It is astounding to go through his writings and discover how much of his energies he poured into the smallest details of self-cultivation in the midst of world-changing activities with thousands of people. Water cures, mud-packs, herbalism, Western gymnastics, vegetarianism, and other body disciplines are the stuff out of which non-violence (*ahimsa*) was derived and made possible in the face of colonial domination. Gandhi's notion of non-violence was far from passivity, born of intense work with the self, disciplining its automatic reactions, toughening its fibers, learning to bring into clear, useful focus its wild impulses. The truth of being that flowed

¹ **Don Hanlon Johnson**, PhD, is the founder of the Somatic Psychology Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies where he is currently a professor. He is the author of several books and journal articles, whose repetitive theme concerns the networks of relationships among individual bodily experience, a sense of self-in-community, and the larger worlds of culture and politics.
djohnson@ciis.edu



from these practices, *Satyagraha*, was truth enfleshed, full-body truth, whose bearers stood firmly in that truth against the purveyors of illusion.

His rigorous attention to the body served the obvious purpose of strengthening the revolutionary for the severe challenges of resistance to violence. In addressing a national association of youth, he said:

Try to follow my ideals as far as you can. For that we should have a good physique. We have to build up our muscles by regular exercise. But that should not be done to indulge in violence. . . Our ideal is to become tough labourers, and our exercises should be toward that end. (Gandhi as cited in Alter, 2000, p. 16)

A secondary purpose was to discipline the hard edges of emotional reactions that fragment the revolutionary community and keep it from harmonious and effective action. Perhaps the most important dimension of his body concerns had to do with purging the body of the effects of colonization which promoted food habits and medical practices, on top of wanton sexual behavior, that weakened the Indian population. His pleas for vegetarianism and celibacy were based on his arguments that these were strategies of resistance and liberation:

We have more than an ordinary share of disease, famines, and pauperism—even starvation among millions. We are being ground down in slavery in such a subtle manner that many of us refuse even to recognize it as such, and mistake our state as one of progressive freedom in spite of the triple curse of economic, mental, and moral drain. (Gandhi, as quoted in Alter, 2000, p. 11)

While Gandhi was working to change the conditions of Indians in apartheid South Africa and colonialized India, Wilhelm Reich was addressing the social devastations in Europe that were the results of the Industrial Revolution, pogroms, and unending military conflicts. Despite their enormous cultural, psychological, and spiritual differences, these two men shared a core belief in the central importance of the body in social change.

As a young physician, Reich was shaped both by psychoanalysis, and by Marxist humanism. Freud made him aware of the roots of impotence within the fluids and nervous channels of the psyche. He saw that the innate energies of the organism became so distorted by the family and religion that they lost their capacities to energize a truly free adult, producing instead passive citizens subject to manipulation by charismatic leaders. From Marx, he became aware of the effects of the larger industrial society on the organism, how the conditions of mass populations of factory workers robbed them of their internal sense of agency. Like Gandhi, he understood that the struggle for freedom required intense practices of transforming the body: "As a result of thousands of years of social and educational distortion, masses of people have become biologically rigid and incapable of freedom. They are not capable of establishing peaceful coexistence" (Reich, 1970, p.319).

In the early 1930s, Reich wrote a hauntingly prophetic analysis of how Hitler succeeded so rapidly in mobilizing hordes of people to engage in a mass movement that seemed obviously contrary to the most basic human values. He raises the question of why it was that countless

thoughtful people were unable to stem the tides of the apocalyptic tragedies they could see bearing down upon them. From his view, the missing piece in revolutions that doomed them to repetitive failure was the anchor of passivity in the body: "... we set out to show the miscalculation that all freedom-fighters until now have made: *The social incapacity for freedom is sexual-physiologically anchored in the human organism*"² (Reich, 1970, p. 346).

Despite profound similarities in their analysis of social impotence, they differed radically in their prescriptions for addressing it. For Gandhi, the inner preparation of the body required severe repression of sexual urges. Reich, by contrast, developed the practice of psychoanalysis in the direction of transforming sexual urges into full-bodied, transgenital orgasm. I use the word 'transgenital' to avoid certain oversimplifications of Reich's bioenergetic psychology into a raw form of sexual release. If one studies his texts carefully, what is at stake is mobilizing the fullest capacities of the body's energies and in contact with other persons. Sheer localized orgasm is for him a deficiency, like gulping one's food. Though certainly rooted in nurturing sexual excitement, the discipline of his work consists in allowing that primal excitation to radiate throughout the entire organism, creating a sense of a fully energized self, a free person grounded in the fullest of his or her agency (Reich, 1972, pp. 318-325).

Like Gandhi, Reich inspired communities of revolutionaries-in-training who still work together to implement his theories for internal transformation with the goal of creating more humane civil societies. Throughout Europe, various communities organized around Reichian personal analytic work focus on bodily energies, combined with pre-natal and peri-natal care, education in early child care, couples counseling, and social advocacy around issues of health and sexuality. The utopian hope is that as healthier children are born and raised, a healthier mass population of more independently minded adults will replace the overwhelming percentage of people who are subject to fascist manipulations.

As one is beset today by the unending debates in US politics about contraception, abortion, gay rights, and uses of violence, the history of Reich's efforts seems all the more relevant. As Reich ended his life scarred by his long experiences of being hounded by psychoanalysts, Marxists, and democratic capitalists, he came to realize that fascism is not a peculiar characteristic of ephemeral political movements in Germany, Spain, Italy, and Japan. It is a universal phenomenon because it is rooted in the human body. When the multiple layers of bodily movements, impulses, and perceptions are not creatively transformed into lives of purpose, mass media and ideologues find it easy to create mass movements based on fear and disorientation.

Neither Gandhi nor Reich achieved enormous successes in the long run. Gandhi was painfully aware that his constant experiments with various strategies of changing himself and changing the nation enjoyed only modest successes. There were the small failures in his attempts to regulate his sexual desires, which may be strangely related to his larger failures as in his tragic inability to forge an alliance with the Muslim communities.

Reich was ousted by every community he tried to join. In 1956, he had been imprisoned in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, on spurious charges of transporting so-called medical equipment

² Italics are original.

across state border. Shortly before he died there in 1957, the F.D.A. held a medieval-style book-burning of everything he had published.

Although their great hopes are dashed in the ruins of fragmented India and Pakistan, and in the depredations of the West, Reich's analysis of fascism and Gandhi's of colonialism are crucial in getting beyond the tragic patterns of revolutions in which the old oppressed, when they succeed in getting power, regularly become the new oppressors. In her book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt (1965) draws out the implications of the fact that the word means 'revolve'. Reich argues that it is not possible to break the cycle without getting at 'the social incapacity for freedom rooted in the human organism.' The repetitive good-willed efforts to create a just social order keep foundering on the shoals of closed-off bodies.

Can we learn from them and move forward taking note of what they missed?

I am in a workshop with Charlotte Selver, the late founder of Sensory Awareness³. We are each standing behind a partner. She is giving us instructions about how to be present to our partner by placing our hands on their shoulders, simply, not trying to do anything, just being there but intricately aware of the fullest possible contact between the contours of our hands and the contours of their shoulders. We do this experiment for some 5-10 minutes. After it is over, one of the touchers complains that her shoulders got a little uncomfortable doing this. Charlotte replies with her characteristically feisty tone of voice, "So?".

Her response hit me like a koan from a Zen patriarch. Here was a 95-year-old woman who had fled to New York when the Nazis first ordered her to wear the arm-band in her German university, who had gone on to wander the world dedicated literally to waking up people to what was happening all around us, living simply and teaching radically, keeping to her task even when deaf and having broken several bones. In that light, her impolite response to a complaint of muscle discomfort was a powerful assault on self-indulgence in a radically embodied way: how could I complain about my tiny aches and pains when the grief of the world was so overwhelming that it needs all the healing we can muster?

In his final years, the late particle physicist David Bohm left his lifelong work to help create more effective communities of social change. He was prompted in that life change by his intimate awareness of the dangers facing us, while bewildered by the difficulties of maintaining collaborative movements towards resolving those dangers. He joined Krishnamurti in developing a web of dialogues around the world to address the seemingly intractable problem of collaboration on social values. In his analysis of entrenched patterns of dominance, aggression, and violence, he found that a primary factor was the forming of false wholes, whose boundaries split people apart. The purpose of the dialogues was to address head-on what they considered to be the heart of those false wholes: the addiction to ideas, particularly 'big' ones—Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu fundamentalism; Marxism; Scientism; Neo-Capitalism, etc. These big ideas are, he felt, tenacious enough to keep people from mobilizing sufficient unity to transform

³ For more information on sensory awareness see Selver & Brooks (2007).

the radical problems that we all share: global warming's serious threat to the planet, poverty, hunger, violence (Bohm, 1988).

Bohm's unique characterization of mass addictions to ideas as the foundations for false wholes led him to become interested in the role of the body as an underlying ground of the fragmentation. Often disguised in fine language and gentle demeanor, the addictions reveal their true selves in bodily comportment. When the ideology is confronted with the 'other' from a different 'whole', a delicate veil descends over the face, the eyes narrow, muscles betray at least a slight hardening, a contrived smile appears along with an unctuous tone of voice. Edging too close to the core of the addiction can provoke a hostile response out of keeping with what seems to be the person's warm personality.

Compared to such gifted leaders as Carl Rogers, Eugene Gendlin, Joanna Macy, and many others, Bohm's dialogue methods are not particularly effective. I introduce him here because of his diagnosis of the addictive nature of societal fragmentation. It had an important impact on my own longstanding attempts to study how ideas are generated by, and anchored in, one's repetitive patterns of breathing, moving, tensing, sensing. Emerging as we are from a long history of institutional dualism, it is only very slowly that we are becoming aware of the central role the body plays in the evolution of consciousness and community.

A key person in bringing this theme to the fore was the cultural historian Norman O. Brown. In his seminal book, *Love's Body* (Brown, 1968), he advances this radical revision of the perennial philosophy:

Union and unification is of bodies, not souls. . . [S]oul, personality and ego are what distinguish and separate us; they make us individuals, arrived at by dividing till you can divide no more—atoms. But psychic individuals, separate, unfissionable on the inside, impenetrable on the outside, are, like physical atoms, an illusion; in the twentieth century, in this age of fission, we can split the individual even as we can split the atom. Souls, personalities, and egos are masks, specters, concealing our unity as body. For it is as one biological species that mankind is one. . . ; so that to become conscious of ourselves as body is to become conscious of mankind as one. (p. 82)

When I first encountered this passage, I had a strangely paradoxical reaction. On the one hand it countered the belief in which I had been schooled that it was the soul's abstract ideals—peace, justice, compassion—that would bring humans together. As bodies, we were just windowless monads moving in the void. And yet, I knew from that same schooling that our sorry history is of a succession of idealistic communities using all means possible, including torture and murder, to get other communities to adopt their values, no matter if the cost means rationalizing an abandonment of their own ideals of love and compassion. I began to study how direct work with such intimate realities as breathing, sensing, moving, and touch might loosen the hardpan that anchored such infertile ideological conflicts.

Over some forty years, I have been trying out various experiments aimed at bringing to the fore the consensual bodily matrix in which we engage with others. I have found again and again that people who were ideologically in conflict—Muslims/Jews, Whites/Blacks, Native

Americans/Christian evangelists, atheists/theists, young/old—would find themselves interested in each other if given the chance to work silently and simply with one another, breathing, touching, and moving. Learning to stay connected with the 'Other's' facial responses, or maintaining a gentle tactile contact, or listening to each other's breathing, reduced the charge provoked by abstract preconceived differences, and allowed people to settle into a more primal level of shared values about the grief of the world and focus more on how to ameliorate it than on differences of opinion.

I am in a workshop which Emilie Conrad Da'Oud and I organized with some fifteen African-American somatics practitioners. Emilie has us in partners. I am standing behind a seated man, a clinical psychologist the same age as I. She asks us to put our hands on our partner's shoulders in simple contact. I do this for some few minutes. At the end, we two exchange feedback. He says at first "I cringed, expecting to be pushed down once again by a white guy. But I felt such relief when I felt you were just there with me".

How to think of the body as a source of collaborative visionary efforts to shape a more just world? What images might galvanize our desires for a more effective way to join with one another?

Richard Niebuhr makes a fruitful distinction between the body as missionary and as pilgrim:

Our bodies are vehicles of passage, and to make pilgrimage is to exercise our inborn motility. It is in this natural propensity to motion that our future as pilgrims is formed. But to discern this fact properly, we have first to attend to another fundamental trait of our being, a pervasive yet determinate feeling that is a ground tenor accompanying all the music of our activities. I will call this ground tenor attachment to place. (Niebuhr, 1984, p. 8)

Reich and Niebuhr join together: the healthy free adult is mobile, not frozen; and the pilgrim is of necessity mobile. To walk the *Camino de Santiago de Compostela*, circumambulate Mount Kailash, or embark on the *Hajj* one has to be in shape, physically vital, capable of handling the rigors of weather and terrain, knowledgeable about how to carry food and water for the journey, skilled in necessary clothing and footwear. Small rigidities will emerge over the long haul to create serious dysfunctions. In this long journey, the pilgrim needs help from others: the ordinary gestures of food, drink, shelter, and directions; the extraordinary ones in case of emergency. Like the Good Samaritan, the pilgrim's helpers do not inquire into the religious proclivities of the person in need before they offer help.

At the same time, the pilgrim has to develop a sensitivity to place. Because *here* (San Francisco) is not *there* (Kailash). There is a deep meaning in undertaking these journeys; they presuppose that place affects one's spiritual life. The pilgrim is in a position to learn that all spiritual viewpoints are rooted in the places where they evolved: the Sinai desert, the polar tundras, the Amazonian and Southeast Asian rain forests. If place is nothing but an accident of ephemeral reality like one's underwear, if each place is essentially like every other, there is no real point in making a difficult journey.

The missionary is a different being. His or her anchor is neither body nor place, but floating entangled in elaborately defined ideas of salvation and virtue. Places are irrelevant in the grand scheme of eternity. The body is important primarily as the dangerous playground of desire, needing to be corralled. Mobility is not one of their virtues; they are more like stone pillars. Conversations inevitably bump up against a stance impervious to any assault: some usual triggers are homosexuality, contraception, earth-based or tribal spiritual practices, etc. Bring any of these topics forward, and the unchanging responses are predictable.

I paint this hard-edged portrait not as an outside elitist critic, but as one who is recovering from a very sophisticated training as a missionary. I have been a zealot for Roman Catholicism, for Roling, for various forms of spirituality. For a good part of my life, I firmly believed that I knew something that others needed to know, and I worked to convince them of such. Only slowly over many years of practice, have I learned to situate myself in my own standing and walking and breathing, here, where I, not you, exist. Learning to inhabit this place, I see that you are indeed a being who knows, if different from me. Perhaps we can walk this land together, even if our notions about it are different. But only if we walk hand-in-hand, sensitive to each other's movements, paying more attention to our rhythms of sound and movement and less to the occasional abstraction.

A friend, trained in a discipline called "Authentic Movement,"⁴ is on the staff of a company that does diversity trainings for corporations. For some years, he had tried without success to get his team to consider incorporating body movement practices in their work. One week, they had begun a seminar at a company in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where most of the employees are from the Rio Grande pueblos. During the first day, the participants were unusually passive and resistant. In their discouragement at the end of the day, his co-leaders said to my friend that since nothing else was working, he could try some of his body stuff. The next morning he did a long session of authentic movement. At the end, the participants said, now we can tell you our names.

I conclude by addressing the difficult tensions manifest in history between spiritual idealisms and social justice. In every spiritual tradition there are transformative body practices: breathing, awareness of bodily sensations and reactions, healing touch, sacred dance, whirling, chanting, meditative postures and mudras. The shapes of communal consciousness that emerge from long practice of any of these are not automatically programmed; they are largely shaped by particular spiritual teachings which vary widely. Sometimes, the meditator is encouraged to cultivate the ways in which these practices open him or her to the greater world; often, the direction is more internal.

In the various transformative practices that have emerged more recently in the West, the evocation of the fuller energies of the body into speech and action dictate radical changes in the world itself. Social change is always in the background. The above analyses suggest the importance of shifting the context of these practices from one in which their content is taught within the confines of preconceived sacred writings to one that builds on the opening of the

⁴ For more information see Pallaro (1999).

practitioner to the Infinite Unknown within which other persons are situated in their unfathomable depths.

The negative theology of the medieval mystics, the *Via Negativa*, holds a clue. In the light of carrying any of these processes far enough, the meditator's sense of self and fixed concepts can dissolve in the immensity of the transconceptual, eventually revealing in its depth and density the earth and our fellow beings together, a matrix on which we can craft a better home, a shelter for all in the great storms.

References

- Alter, J. (2000). *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Arendt, H. (1965). *On Revolution*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Bohm, D. (1988). *The Deeper Structure of Thought and Corresponding Neurophysiological Processes as a Major Source of Conflict*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Brown, N.O. (1968). *Love's Body*. New York, NY: Vintage Press.
- Gandhi, M. (1958). *Collected Works* (Vol.76). New Delhi, India: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
- Niebuhr, R.R. (1984). Pilgrims and Pioneers. *Parabola*, IX (3), p.8.
- Pallaro, P. (Ed.).(1999). *Authentic Movement*. London, UK: Kingsley.
- Reich, W. (1970). *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. (Vincent R. Carfagno, Trans.). New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Reich, W. (1972). *Character Analysis* (Vincent R. Carfagno, Trans. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Selver, C. & Brooks, C. (2007). *Reclaiming Vitality and Presence: Sensory Awareness as a Practice for Life*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.