

Authentic Movement and Buddhism

Awakening in the Present Moment

By Zoë Avstreih

*If the doors of perception were cleansed,
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.*

—William Blake

It is with a sense of humility that I approach writing this article about Authentic Movement and its relationship to Buddhism. I was asked to do so from the perspective of teaching Authentic Movement at Naropa University, a non-sectarian university founded by the late Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, a lineage holder of both the Kagyu and Nyingma Buddhist traditions. Naropa University embodies Trungpa's vision to create a university that would combine contemplative studies with traditional Western scholastic and artistic disciplines. I do not identify myself as a Buddhist; on a cellular level, I experience myself as Jewish. However, I did not hesitate when offered the opportunity to both practice and teach the discipline of Authentic Movement in a contemplative educational setting, an educational setting that balances the study of specific academic and artistic fields with traditional practices for training awareness. I began meditating in the 1970s and continue to practice mindfulness awareness, or what I would refer to as the awakening of the witness function, primarily through the discipline of Authentic Movement. It was this convergence of paths that brought me to Naropa.

Authentic Movement has its roots in the intersection of the fields of Dance/Movement Therapy and Jungian depth psychology. As a practice, it has its own integrity, deeply informing creative expression, contemplative and meditative practices, and healing of the body and the psyche. Authentic Movement is a profoundly simple form in which a mover moves with eyes closed in the presence of a witness. It is the practice and study of mover, witness, and the relationship between the two. And at its core, it is about the trust in the body to lead us toward healing, the development of the inner witness, and conscious presence.

Fundamental to the discipline of Authentic Movement is the understanding that transformation must be rooted in the body. This means we begin right

here, right now, in our body, in this moment. We are the path, life is the path; and this understanding is the basis of Buddhist thought and practice. "From the Buddhist perspective, our spiritual journey begins here—with this very body and mind. Who we are now consists of these two, body and mind, and who we might become will also be expressed through body and mind." (The Dzogchen Ponlop, Rinpoche, 2004, p. 53)

Authentic Movement is an invitation to be with the truth of the moment as it arises in the body—no right, no wrong. It requires impeccable attention to impulse, sensation, image, and feeling, allowing what arises to sequence through awareness into movement, which can be visible or invisible to the outer witness. It is fundamentally a practice of mindfulness awareness. It provides an opportunity for the experience of direct embodied learning, moment-to-moment. Mindfulness is seeing directly, paying bare attention without judgment. Awareness is the spaciousness in which we see. The combination of mindfulness and awareness brings us into the present moment, able to see it directly, precisely, and spaciously, supporting our ability to be fully present in life with compassion for ourselves and others. As our practice deepens, we develop what is called in Buddhism "Choiceless Awareness," the capacity to be present and welcoming to whatever arises.

"Mindfulness is knowing what you are doing while you are doing it—experiencing your life not as an afterthought but as a living presence." (Levine, 2005, p. 120) Consciousness has the capacity to observe itself. (p. 120) This is the witness; it is constant, non-judgmental, and impersonal. The witness is the faculty of awareness itself, free from the limitation of personality. It is there whether we practice or don't practice. As one of my teachers once said, "It is easy to have a practice, but it is difficult to be one who practices," for to practice means to wholeheartedly make the commitment to wake up in this life. In the broadest sense, this is what

it means in the Buddhist tradition "To Take Refuge in the Buddha." It is the vow, the commitment, to engage fully and honestly in practice to wake up for the benefit of all sentient beings.

To develop mindfulness awareness, to stay consciously connected to the witness function, requires that one is immersed in a practice that develops the muscle of attention. At its roots, Authentic Movement is such a practice. Mindfulness is bare attention. According to Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, "Mindfulness is the process of relating with individual situations directly, precisely, definitely. Mindfulness is like a microscope; it is neither an offensive nor a defensive weapon. . . . The function of the microscope is just to clearly present what is there." (Gimian, 2004, p. 219)

Mindfulness leads to awareness. "The Sanskrit word for awareness is *smriti*, which means "recognition," "recollection." (Gimian, p. 219) Awareness provides space; it sees what is but does not cling to it. "Mindfulness is the vanguard of awareness. We flash on a situation and diffuse that one-pointedness into awareness." (p. 220) The development of mindfulness awareness allows us to be present for life as it is. We begin to wake up to our humanness and develop compassion for ourselves and others. As we catch glimpses of our lack of solidity, we are able to let go of the need to be seen in a certain way or the need to see others as so vastly different and separate.

Fundamental to the community of movers and witnesses is the commitment to develop the witness function. We practice embodied mindfulness awareness, seeing what is without judgment and developing "choiceless awareness." As we walk our circle to create the sacred space of mover and witness, we create a collective body dedicated to seeing clearly, moving beyond the solidity of the ego to glimpse the interconnectedness of being.

There are obstacles on the path toward waking up, for the ego will take those moments where we glimpse the magnificent brilliance of reality and co-opt it once again into what makes us "special," "different," and "better." Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, coined the

phrase "Spiritual Materialism," to point to this tendency of the ego to grasp and solidify, to take experiences of a spiritual nature and use them to make our sense of "I" solid once again. He found this tendency particularly prevalent in the West, perhaps, the extension of our materialistic view of life. If one takes on Authentic Movement as a true practice, then one must embrace this tendency of the ego. It provides us with yet another opportunity to practice mindfulness awareness. We notice it without judgment and come back once again to the moment. Practice does not fix us. Practice does not end pain in the world. Practice holds the potential to wake up. It helps us cultivate the embodied truth of

interconnectedness so we can deepen our compassion, so we can live our life as a "sacred yes" in the service of something greater than ourselves. As Nietzsche said, "Life requires a sacred yes."

"Buddhism is not a religion in the traditional sense, but a science of the mind. It is a genuine attempt to see through the illusion that the

world as we perceive it is solid and real." (The Dzogchen Ponlop, Rinpoche, 2004, p. 53.) It is an invitation to explore the depths of our inner world, to discover the true nature of the self. Meditation provides a tool to investigate this sense of self and how it influences each moment, each interaction, and each experience. This is also the essence of the discipline of Authentic Movement, the mindfulness awareness practice of seeing directly, spaciously, without clinging. In the practice, we own our projections, clean our perceptions, and have moments when we are nothing but awareness, seeing only the vast, open luminosity of the world.

The Buddhist path is divided into three vehicles that represent the progressive stages of Buddhist teaching. The Hinayana path focuses on individual liberation. The Mahayana path focuses on the teaching of emptiness and compassion and introduces the ideal of the bodhisattva, one who is dedicated to the liberation of all sentient beings. The Varayana path, also known as the "diamond vehicle," is the path of discovering "indestructible wakefulness." The foundation of all paths is the practice of meditation.*

It is possible to view Authentic Movement practice



through the lenses of these three paths of Buddhism. As we enter practice, we work with our own liberation from habitual patterns of mind and body. The cultivation of the witness function creates the spacious field for the energy of old wounds to sequence through the body, releasing us to the birthright of our potential. And this birthing brings with it the readiness and the desire to sit as witness/midwife for others, to move beyond the path of self-liberation to the path of compassion. To truly sit as witness is to practice the ideal of bodhisattva, to dedicate awareness in the service of others. And perhaps, for some, the dedication to practice deepens into a commitment to discover "indestructible wakefulness" or at least the momentary glimpses of the vast, luminous state of nonduality. Here the pure nature of mind is free to manifest in spontaneous, compassionate activity that benefits all.

*Your vision will become clear only when
you look into your heart.
Who looks outside, dreams.
Who looks inside, awakens.*

—Carl Jung ○

*Each of the three vehicles of Buddhism works with the body in a different way. For a clear and concise view of this, I refer the reader to an article by The Dzogchen Ponlop, Rinpoche, cited below.

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Alton: Right, that's the heart of it. And Authentic Movement practice keeps coming back to that. Because here's the witness, the outer witness, accepting us, practicing acceptance, accepting themselves as well, practicing that. So the setup is that it's an accepting, nonjudgmental, compassionate role: a practice. As a mover, we can transfer the acceptance onto the outer witness or take it back into our own inner witness. Yet if we don't accept that God (or our witness, or our inner witness) is accepting, loving, forgiving, even if there's grace pouring in from the witness, the whole community, or the way the universe is, then we don't appropriate it. We don't know how to experience it. And our inner judge, our inner critic, keeps clamping down on us, telling us we're not doing it right, or that we aren't good enough, to be accepted. Doing it right, however, is irrelevant. Theologically, it is a move from "works righteousness" to a sense of being accepted, which is grace.

There is grace abounding in the world that we can participate in, that we can perpetuate, that we can enhance by this simple practice. ○

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