

## **Doing Being**

### Tibetan Buddhism and Post Modern Dance Improvisation

Don't quote me. Isn't that what the Buddha meant with his final advice, to rather speak for ourselves as we discover our innate potential for freedom?

I am sensing my feet in contact with the earth. I am standing. My awareness opens to include fingers fluttering slightly as if to catch a branch or leaf of a tall tree. Warm, gentle exhales through both nostrils sound like a small ocean wave caressing the rocky and sandy shore. Toes branch out, roots of this nervous system are gaining purchase on the moving planet. Blood circulates, describing pulsating messages of life. It is a heart-pounded lettering, a gentle flowing script, subtle and intimate.

Buddha Dharma and Post-Modern Dance arrive in my life at the same time and place, at Naropa Institute in 1977. I go to discover formal dance and find myself joining the sitting and walking practices too. I am attracted to meditation, drawn to the shrine room by the red cushions and all the people silently being in stillness. It's like this: A gong rings and the whole room changes. There is a rising in the space and a movement of through and around. The humans are a flock, walking on a path marked by bright cushions and silk bannered walls. We calibrate our steps, measuring to the person in front and return to our seats when called by the gong.

Later, in a Berkeley workshop, Judson Era Post-Modern choreographer Steve Paxton introduced me to "the stand" through his dance work called Contact Improvisation. In class, Steve utters an image and our perceptions shift in that moment. He says, "easy breathing" or "let gravity have you" or "the three centers of weight are counterbalancing along your spine." The room starts dancing although we appear to be still. We are practicing a reflexive standing, witnessing the tiniest reflexes of our nervous system as it holds us upright. The movement is barely visible.

The Four Thoughts That Turn The Mind, common to all lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, are dharma contemplations that help us freshly connect with the path. The first thought is that our human body is precious and that inhabiting it fully is a doorway to presence. Whenever I practice standing, this first thought lives in me. I am flooded with sensations of gratitude, purpose and meaning.

It is late 1977 in Salt Lake City, and I am encountering my first workshop in Contact Improvisation, a dance form where communication between partners occurs through touch. I am at an evening jam, a casual atmosphere of self-guided practice that contrasts the teacher-led mood of a class. I begin moving in the space noticing that a particular young man I avoided partnering with during class is possibly my only option for duet practice. Moving while considering this potential encounter, I taste my aversion.

The second mind-turning thought is that of death and impermanence; how everything disappears, changes. As I'm dancing I am aware of an unreasonable prejudice I have based on the appearance of the young man. I judge his oddly shaped humpy spine, bumpy skin and tangled hair. I imagine stale sweat and yellow teethe. I also sense a glimmer for change in my outlook towards him.

Soloing, I'm playing with the sensation of weight sloshing from my upper back to the side of my hip to leg to arm, sensing too the peripheral and impending choice of partnering in duet. I am discovering disorientation and spherical space as I dance, falling softly into the floor and relaxing tensions. The third thought that turns the mind could be described as taking responsibility for our actions and relationships with others. A bit frightened, I consider how this man and I are moving in each other's sphere of influence. Any action I do reveals my consciousness. What will I choose?

We come into close range. Either one or both of us could make a move to partner by extending a touch. The fourth mind-turning thought is to consider our ability to choose a bigger view for our lives. The sensation of my body opening and relaxing is more compelling than the tension or closing sensation that comes from evaluating and fearing. A powerful curiosity leads the edge of my skin and cells. This dancing body does not believe the mental story my aversion is telling.

My partner and I connect through touch at our backs. The smell of him is musty, his t-shirt a little stiff from dried sweat. We are both new at this. Our bodies' learning curve cracks jokes that our dancing naturally knows how to humor. There is a third thing created between us that we share and listen to. Aversion melts like glacial rivers aligning with the fall of the mountain. Our reflexes begin to entrain. My whole body is opening, surrendering further. We are discovering together new territories in the movement as we dance in the sea of equanimity.

Witnessing the life and death of a patterned habitual story line is an enlightening experience. Emerging whole and equal through discovering the release of a tight self towards a feared other removes a veil of ignorance. Buddhist teacher, writer, and translator Ken McLeod speaks of the power of attention. Attention notices the reactivity in the first place and then witnesses the pattern's entire life-death cycle. We are left with naturally arising qualities of mind which inspire true caring for countless other beings. These qualities are known in Tibetan Buddhism as the Four Immeasurables: love, compassion, joy and equanimity.

Discovering such remarkable qualities arising naturally in the course of a dance is both profound and very ordinary. The Six Paramitas or Transcendent Perfections of generosity, patience, discipline, effort, meditation and wisdom are also palpable experiences in the course of a collaborative dance making process.

## **Tuning In Transcendence**

Of the Six Paramitas, generosity is said to have been the first taught by the Buddha. Tuning Scores, invented by visionary dancer, choreographer and performing artist Lisa Nelson, are compositional in nature. Like Paxton, one of her long-time collaborators, Lisa freely extends her experiments to the collective community—no permissions or certifications are required for me to carry my learned version of Tuning Scores into my own work. The openness of generosity is a spirit that uplifts every piece of the action—the giver, receiver and the gift itself. Generosity is a nice place to begin.

Tuning is based on constructing dances in space and exposes communication between the dancers. The practice includes using verbal calls like “pause,” “play,” “reverse,” and actions like physically entering or exiting the space. These calls and actions reveal the dance-making desires of the collaborators, something that usually remains mysterious and vague during dance improvisations.

I am imagining a Tuning “run” while also tracking my inner life of practicing dharma. In this fantasy, I am sensing the room and my fellow collaborators gathered on the edge of the composing space for the dance. The room is bare. I see a dancer enter the space. I empathize with how her weight shifts into the balls of her feet. I’m in a state of “open presence,” a meditation state described by Tibetan masters such as Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche as simply opening attention, relaxed and unedited. In open awareness the dancers are tracking personal compositional desire and processing this information as it becomes expressed in space.

I track the motion, vision, sound and story of this lone dancer entering the space. As she enters I hear the musical chirp of floor boards creaking, the percussive swish of her feet on the wood. I see and feel the spirals in her body as she simply walks. I register surprise as she suddenly stills herself mid-stride. I see her inner balancing systems reaching for organization. My imagination jumps to life. What has led her to compose stillness then and there?

Another dancer suddenly crashes into the space shocking my reflection on the first dancer’s statue-like stillness. The paramita of patience in Sanskrit means “absence of anger.” Implicit in that definition is the presence of anger, craving and the frustration of suffering. At the sound of the entering dancer’s crashing form, an electric feeling of fear verging on anger moves through my chest and arms; my right ear is leading the turn of my head towards the source of the sound. My heart is beating more quickly, my mouth is dry and a tension overtakes my whole form, now slightly paralyzed. Patience is the deep listening to the fear and anger as it arises and subsides while I watch the dance composition change. I note that the previous world I had been acquainting myself with is gone forever.

The paramita of discipline is tied to cleanliness of action. When does an action have a residue, a left over sense of remorse or guilt? “Pause” is called in a gently singing voice from a dancer to my right. The ensuing stillness in the room reveals the sounds of a

dragonfly battering its wings against the window and a tractor mowing the field beyond. By attending to our sensations and feelings we can discover our own ethical discipline. We can bow to our mistakes and begin again.

The two dancers in the composing space simultaneously begin a lyrical stepping duet as if they had suddenly been placed into a completely new scene. The previous image of extreme contrast, stillness and a loud crashing movement, is transformed. The dancers' unison movements travel through space and seem to be accompanied by sounds of life around us.

Watching the duet I notice my body is sinking into a dull, numb state. The paramita of effort is about remembering to practice waking up. I register this sinking and discover a curious seeker in me that begins to chart sensations: heavy, tired, a remote sadness in my face and heart, short breaths. Transcendent effort is remembering that forgetting is not something we can control. Beating oneself up for forgetting is violent and off the point. The moment of remembering is a cause for celebration, no matter what. Cued by my body's symptoms, a visual memory of the Tuning run's first image appears in my mind: the woman alone walking into stillness. I realize I am mourning its loss.

The recognition of the mourning brings a warmth and tenderness, followed by a new spirit of vitality. The paramita of meditation is the ongoing flow of awareness in every aspect of our lives including the celebration and joy of having a practice. I open my eyes and ears to discover a pocket of space in the room that invites me to enter the dance composition. Inspired by the original image that disappeared, I want to offer a memorial to it. I walk into the space and stop mid-stride.

I am joined by a dancer entering from the edge who touches my arm with her elbow. We begin to move together. While the other duet continues its unison step dancing, my partner and I explode into a vigorous counter-point dance in physical contact. The paramita of wisdom is the surrender of letting go, allowing natural mind to effortlessly reveal itself. We are taking each other's weight, flowing into and out of the floor. I am lifted to a balance high on her shoulder as we turn spinning like a pinwheel and just as suddenly we fall...

Ken McLeod once asked a crowd during a public talk something like, "what exactly are you trusting when you let go and fall backwards in a trust-fall exercise, where a couple of people are behind you prepared to catch your blind fall?" Ken provided his own answer after some comments from the group. I heard him utter, "What are you trusting? Nothing whatsoever."

As a dancer I know this "nothing" so well. Recall the falling moment of the duet mentioned above, a third thing is happening there that is beyond either my or my partner's conscious choices. I am falling and sliding down my partner's landscape of flesh, muscle and bone. It is as if our fluid states of weight and balance have combined. I have no conscious sense what will happen next. It is a gap, experiential knowledge of

“nothing whatsoever.” Our bodies’ tissues are open to this falling moment where unconscious reflexes are firing and we survive the fall, with glee.

### **Between the Earth and Me**

By taking the earth as witness to his enlightenment, the Buddha offers me the suggestion that presence in the body is the pure witness of our lived experience. Embodiment and the earth are interconnected. The human experience of touching the earth is constant as we continuously relate to the call of gravity. Although constant, like breathing, our sense of gravity can be completely ignored or taken for granted and not experienced.

In dancing, I sometimes conflate the *idea* of moving with the actual *sense* of moving. The idea of moving is disembodied and has a quality of ambition. Sensed moving is embodied with awareness flowing throughout the body and is related to curiosity.

Recently in a solo performance I was trying so hard to feel the movement that I missed the sensing of my body, even as I appeared to move. Afterwards I discerned that my ambition was connected with an “effort to please others,” a life-long pattern related to a wobbly sense of self-worth. In a second performance there was a shift; everything that came to awareness while dancing was welcome. Curiosity guided and included everything, even the sensation of ambition with its metallic hardness and the easy stretch of yawning with its supreme neglect of the audience.

In dharma practice, ambition appears as my wish to be fixed. When examined closely, this “fix me” fantasy has physical sensations that include tense jaws, arms and hands, tight and searching vision, thoughts like “must do” and a sense of hovering or about to explode. In moments of pausing and simply looking closely into the sensations, there is a returning to presence and, a natural, easy curiosity begins.

Physical contact is earthy. In contact there is a transmission of blessing between humans, environments and objects. Taking a pilgrimage walk around Tibet’s sacred Mount Kailash, spreading our bodies completely on the ground in a gesture of surrender, touching holy objects, dancing with endless varieties of people, seeing live performance, video and photos, reading writings-- in these ways and more transmission occurs. Our practice of dance or dharma is energized as embodied knowledge passes along, one body to the next.

It is profound to discover, over decades of living, my place in a lineage of dance or dharma. Even more, it is vivid and meaningful beyond words to sense how my participation contributes to the evolution of these forms. Gratitude towards my teachers, collaborators and companions on the path arises naturally. Coming to presence and letting sensation radiate is a choiceless act of freedom. Alive, I touch the earth constantly and receive unconditional support for this life.

