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The Feeling of Me

Part One

By Jae Gruenke

I first began to know who I was in a West African dance class. I'd come to the class a few times before, but this time suddenly the self-consciousness and disorientation I'd felt gave way to a pure experience I'd never imagined. The studio was saturated with the music of drums. I was drenched in it. I circled my arms through the air and felt as though the earth moved under my feet. I drank in the rich colors of the room, and the feeling of my body moving became – incredibly - the feeling of *me*. I circled my arms again and again and felt I was saying myself.

My experience in that dance class was open-ended – I wasn't trying to change myself in any way. I was simply immersed in the experience, and since my own movement *was* the experience, I felt myself in a clear way I never had before. I am sure I couldn't have felt myself this way if I hadn't been moving my body.

Of course there are many notions of what the self is and how it's involved with the body, if at all. The body-mind methods I explored for this column and the next both see the relationship between movement and feeling as fully reciprocal, and conscious embodiment as the goal. This month's method, Dance Meditation as taught by Dunya Dianne McPherson, and next issue's Sounder Sleep System, both offer practitioners a directed means simply to experience themselves, without trying to change what they find. The result is transformative beyond what any willful efforts to change could accomplish.

DANCE MEDITATION

My friend Nancy-Laurel has told me over and over how much she loves her dance meditation class and her teacher, Dunya Dianne McPherson. She's told me how her experience of herself has evolved through the guided improvisation. She was fascinated for a while with small, trembling movements; lately, when she closes her eyes and lets go, she finds herself lengthening her body and rising on her toes like a ballet dancer. It amazes her that she dances always completely free of pain, even though her neck otherwise often "goes out." Finally she persuaded me to give it a try.

We begin the class nearly reclining, timing our inhalations and exhalations to the quiet, rhythmic music. We follow Dunya's lead, repeating a sequence of gentle stretches that alters and deepens bit by bit. My body begins to lengthen, awaken, and relax. Dunya hardly speaks, and the atmosphere in the classroom becomes thick with the attention we pay to our languorous movements.

Dunya's guided warm-up transitions comfortably into an individual one with the instruction to close our eyes and move any way we like. I continue the luxurious stretching on the floor, following my impulses as I become fascinated in the differences between my right and left sides.

I sneak a peek at the rest of the room and see that, truly, everyone has found a unique way of dancing. Some have risen to their feet. Many play with their natural posture and gestures I recognize from before the class began. Looking at them, I want nothing other than to go back to what is as uniquely mine as their movements are theirs. So I close my eyes again.

After a while, Dunya directs us to pair up and study each other's movement. We try echoing the movement of our partner's pelvis with our arm or leg or head. When that's exhausted, we touch our partner's hips with our eyes closed to feel their movement, and then dance together, one partner touching and copying the other. The instructions are very specific. At first I feel jarred out of my impressionistic private dance by this analytical process, but then I realize I'm completely absorbed by my partner's kinesthetic environment, filling myself with the feeling of her moving. It's like eating food from an unfamiliar culture – strange and exquisite.

We return to our own individual dancing, eyes closed, moving to the music as we please, but enriched with the sense of the people we'd just been dancing with. I feel myself move more delicately than I am wont, with all the qualities of a string of pearls: light, luminous, rounded, and refined. Eventually I wear myself out and settle against a wall to watch the other students. Curiously, their movements seem to shed my gaze as a tent sheds water. Though they're bared for me to see by the way they move, the significance of those movements is theirs alone, and I can't divine it.

At last Dunya invites us all to rest on our backs for a final long repose. The music plays softly in the background, and the memory of my dancing plays through my body just below the level of my conscious mind.

I tell Dunya later that, for an ostensibly spiritual undertaking, I'd found her class surprisingly grounded in physical realities. She explained the class is an evolving form developed from her background in dance, yoga, and the Sufi tradition she taught for many years. "I want to help my students go beyond habitualness to something that is happening right now... to come to a sense of relaxation and self-trust, and feel more connected to their whole body self. I really feel like there isn't anything in terms of spiritual pursuit that should go away from the body. I don't embrace the path of transcendence. Embodiment is my path."

FITNESS RESOURCES

Dunya Dianne McPherson teaches regular weekly classes on Sundays from 5:30-7 pm at the Dharma Yoga Center, 297 Third Ave. @ 23rd St, and on Wednesdays from 6-8 pm at the Mark Morris Dance Center, 4 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. Both classes are \$12 for a single class, or \$110 for a 10-class card. She also leads regular retreats in the Catskills and teaches workshops throughout the country. For more information, call (212) 226-2114 or go to www.dancemeditation.org, where you can also purchase her videos.

If you can't make it to Dunya's class, there are a number of others you might try. When I typed "dance meditation" into an internet search engine, I found a stunning number of Web Sites. The conceptual underpinnings seem to vary quite a bit, but the practices themselves all seem similarly oriented to open-ended self-discovery. Here are the highlights:

Roth 5 Rhythms, TM developed by Gabrielle Roth, is a fairly structured exploration of self through different rhythms and qualities of movement. For classes in New York, contact The Moving Center at (212) 760-1381. On her Web Site, www.ravenrecording.com, you can get class and workshop information, or buy her books, videos, and CD's of her original music.

Trance Dance, developed by Wilbert Alix, is a dance meditation method based on shamanism. Alix teaches workshops throughout the country. Call (512) 708-8888 or go to www.trance-dance.com.

SynergyDance was developed by Charmaine Lee, and is based on the principles of polarity therapy. For classes in New York, call the Open Center at (212) 219-2527. For international information, go to www.synergydance.com.

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