An Enquiry into Direct Experience: Authentic Movement and the Five Skandhas

Linda Hartley

My questioning about what it means to experience life directly - not filtered through a haze of expectations, memories, projections, fantasies, fears, beliefs about how things are, or should be - but directly and simply as it presents itself to me in this moment, has grown from many years of engagement with Buddhist meditation and T'ai Chi Ch'uan, Body-Mind Centering and Authentic Movement. The first two, ancient, well-worn paths, invite my mind to rest in the present moment, in my body, in this place. The latter, both innovative disciplines developed within the contemporary field of bodymind exploration, offer methods to explore the dialogue between form and meaning, the interface of matter with consciousness, within a spirit of acceptance and ongoing enquiry.

Within the practice of these disciplines I am asking myself, what does it mean to be present, fully present in the moment? What is direct experience? What draws me away from it? What encourages or allows me to enter it?

For me, sensation serves as the most direct way to experience the moment, just as it is, simply, without elaboration. When I come to my senses, pay attention to the impressions entering my awareness through the gateways of my sense organs, I become present, here, now.

In the 60's and 70's the mantra 'be here now' was the message of the time. Although it often led to hedonistic indulgence, or an unwillingness to accept responsibility, the message is nevertheless of immense value. It may be during difficult times, when looking to the past evokes feelings of depression and despair at the losses, failures, humiliations of life, and looking to the future brings only anxiety and fear, that we can learn most directly how coming into the present can bring enormous relief, even joy. Paying attention to the sensory world around me, and within me, I come into my body, this place, the present moment. I become present, and from the experience of presence, anxiety and despair loosen their hold on me.

This is not the same as doing what I want because the past and future don't matter. It means being open to and accepting the fullness of the moment, its pain as well as its joy, accepting life as it is. I am still amazed, each time I am graced with this experience, at its power to heal, to open and connect, to bring clarity and peace.

Developing Distance from Experience

Psychology offers us maps of how, as infants and young children, we begin to distance ourselves from the immediacy of the moment. Early experience is a bodily, sensory event. Through the body we touch and are touched in all sorts of ways; we move and are moved. Life is experienced through movement and sensation, and through this we begin to know ourselves, to develop a sense of self (Juhan, 1987).

Some of these sensations are pleasant, and some are not. We learn about pleasure and pain through bodily sensation, and begin to differentiate what we like and what we don't like. At this stage there are no names, no categories - just like and dislike, or indifference.

Emotional life begins to differentiate out of these bodily felt sensations: joy, frustration, fear, anger, excitement, satisfaction are experienced. Gradually we come to associate certain activities with specific sensations and feelings which we like or don't like, and we begin to learn ways to invite that which we want, and avoid what we don't want.

By this time we have drawn some way from experiencing life directly; we are beginning to solidify the moment into desires and aversions, and thus to divide experience into good and bad. The wholeness and simplicity of the moment has become fractured. This process takes a massive leap as language and mental faculties develop. Language has the wonderful ability to enable us to communicate complex thoughts and feelings which we could not express in a purely bodily way. But it can also distance us further from the totality of experience; when we categorise, name, and give language to experience we must select, discriminate, discard some aspects of experience in favour of others. The private and disavowed self (Stern, 1985) is born, and the present moment is further fractured into what can be consciously accepted and expressed, and what can't.

Of course, this process is necessary for healthy ego development, necessary if we are to live in society, contribute and communicate with our fellow human beings. It is also a natural development, as brain cells forge new synaptic connections, enabling us to comprehend and master our world. But it is important to recognise that there is loss as well as gain. What we lose is the simple and direct experience of life, moment to moment, without expectations, categories, judgments, exclusions - life lived fully, in the body, through the senses, in the moment.

As we grow this process will continue to a greater or lesser extent. We may be educated and conditioned into rejecting whole areas of experience, and our own vast and rich inner life may find no way to access our conscious mind and expression. The unavowed, unlived aspects of our experience may live on in the body, hidden from consciousness - sensations and feelings experienced only as disturbing body symptoms or dream images, surfacing from the body-unconscious.

The Five Skandhas

Buddhist psychology also offers a map of the development of ego which appears to have close parallels with this understanding of western

psychology, although the overall context has additional levels of meaning which are not present in our own model. From the Buddhist point of view, every phenomena that appears to have a solid, enduring existence, including our sense of self, is related to the function of the ego. (The terms self and ego are often used interchangeably in Buddhist teaching.) Ego, and our attachment to it, is the source of all our suffering, for by clinging to it we separate ourselves from the spaciousness of our true nature and the unity of life. From this point of view, the development of ego is a process by which we enmesh ourselves more and more deeply in pain, confusion, and isolation.

The Abhidharma teachings contain a description of ego development through five stages, or skandhas. This is a complex and profound description; I will speak of it here on a very simple level, according to the limitations of space and my own understanding. The first stage is called Form, and it is the first step in the creation of a boundaried ego, an individual sense of self, out of the open space of awareness. It includes all phenomena - forms, images, projections - which are perceivable through the senses and the mind. Our perception of reality is filtered through a certain lack of clarity, a confusion or ignorance, which causes us to begin to solidify open awareness and perceive it as separate and solid forms of existence. This process makes things more tangible, and thus more manageable; it gives us some sense of substantiality, security, permanence in a world which really has none of these characteristics.

In the second skandha, Sensation/ Feeling, this solidifying process goes a little further; we begin to identify the experiences of the senses and mind, the forms and projections created at the first stage, as pleasurable and friendly, painful and hostile, or neutral.

Thus we deepen the dualistic stance. Because sensations and feelings are impermanent, the essence of our happiness and suffering, which is based upon them, is also impermanent. If we don't understand this, we will develop attachments and aversions to things that have no real, ongoing existence.

This leads us to the third skandha, Recognition/Perception. The first two skandhas involve, in a sense, straightforward experiencing; at the third stage, the process of solidifying open space is completed as we identify, name, categorise our experiences. Our world is now boxed up and labelled. We begin to make judgments about this and that, and cling to a mistaken sense of the substance and reality of our projections and judgments.

In effect all three stages happen almost simultaneously, but one is automatically constellated by the previous one because they are, in a sense, pushing up close to each other, with no space, no room to simply be. Trungpa uses the image of piercing a needle through a pile of paper; as soon as you have penetrated the first sheet, you make contact with the second, and so on (Trungpa, 1975). We are usually unaware of the first two stages, and jump straight to the third skandha where we automatically label our experiences without fully and consciously experiencing the uniqueness of the moment.

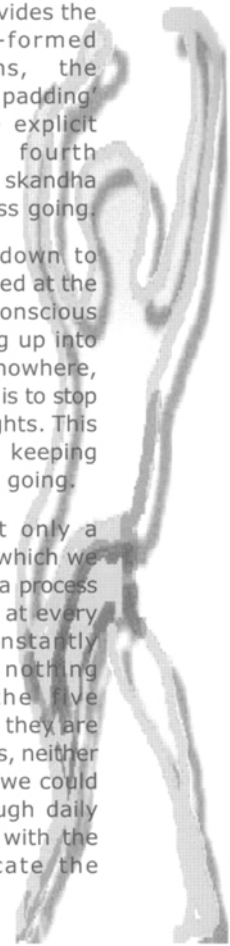
For example, let's say the colour red reaches my eye; at this stage it is not yet named, but let's say that it is red that I see. It gives me a cosy feeling, a sort of warm glow behind my eyes and in my belly; I like this sensation and would like more of it. Then I recognise and name it - red. Red is something I like, and I begin to desire more red things - a red sweater, a red car, a red front door; I even want to be friends with someone who has red hair! Blue, on the other hand I don¹t like, and go out of my way to avoid it.

The fourth skandha is called Formation, or Intellect. This concerns our mental activity, our thoughts, opinions, beliefs, the internal dialogue which constantly accompanies us. Bodymind patterns, attitudes, and emotions also belong to this skandha. Here, instead of just allowing a perception or thought to arise in our awareness, we elaborate, associate, remember, develop our ideas; this process of mental elaboration takes us further and further away from our direct experience of the moment, deeper and deeper into duality.

The fifth stage, which is the fulfilment of the whole process, and also in a sense the ground for the previous stages, is Consciousness. In this context, Consciousness refers to a clear, articulated, intelligent quality of knowing. In the first skandha, the senses make contact with objects; by the fifth stage, the basic intelligence knows what that object is, based upon previous experiences, learning, prejudice, and conditioning. The fifth skandha contains all of the forms, sensory perceptions, feelings, and thought patterns of the previous stages. However, they differ from the explicit thought patterns of the fourth skandha; Consciousness ;provides the constant stream of half-formed thoughts and perceptions, the undergrowth' or 'background padding' (Trungpa) out of which the explicit thought patterns of the fourth skandha develop. It is the fifth skandha which keeps the whole process going.

Anyone who has ever sat down to meditate will have been amazed at the unstoppable stream of subconscious thoughts which keep bubbling up into awareness, seemingly out of nowhere, and dismayed at how difficult it is to stop the elaboration of these thoughts. This is the fifth skandha at work, keeping the whole mechanism of ego going.

The skandhas describe not only a process of ego-development which we all, as infants, go through, but a process which occurs in the moment, at every single moment, as ego constantly recreates itself. There is nothing inherently wrong with the five skandhas and their contents; they are completely natural occurrences, neither good nor bad, without which we could not orientate ourselves through daily life. But there is a problem with the way in which we complicate the



simplicity of each moment through our complex elaboration of associations, projections, judgments, and interpretations. It is the source of all our personal and interpersonal conflict, the way we solidify our position, become entrenched in our opinions, and create enemies within and without.

Meditation offers an opportunity to slow down so that we can notice the workings of the skandhas; we are invited to simply observe the form, the sensations, the emotions, the thought patterns, and even the subconscious undergrowth of the fifth skandha, as they present themselves to our awareness. With practice and patience, a gap begins to appear in the movement of the skandhas, so that we cease for a moment to elaborate from one stage to the next, and the next. We allow the sensation to simply be, without judging the pain in the stomach to be unpleasant, without worrying we might be developing a stomach ulcer, wondering what caused it, imagining it was stress, engaging in an imagined argument with the man who angered us so much yesterday, deciding he is the cause of the stomach ulcer, planning our retaliation ... and so on.

When we can simply let each event be, in its own nature and simplicity, space begins to open up again. We are less bound, for a moment, by our projections, our habits, and our fears. We notice the thought or feeling or sensation, experience the moment directly and simply. This can be such an enormous relief from the complexities and complications of constant elaboration, that we wonder why we don't do it all the time. It is the simplest of things, and yet it is the most difficult to achieve. It would be far easier for most of us to earn a PhD than to learn to experience life directly, in the moment. Yet its value makes it worth trying.

Of course, in psychotherapy we spend a lot of time elaborating our thoughts, feelings, memories, and associations. The process of therapy necessitates that we explore our unconscious assumptions and attitudes, uncover our projections and judgments, make connections, analyse and try to understand our behaviour. There is a necessary place for this work, but if we don't ever let go and simply experience the moment, we may remain stuck in an interminable labyrinth, which is what the whole process of the five skandhas is.

I have witnessed clients, after struggling for a long time with some problem, suddenly become able to settle deeply into themselves, into their body, and simply be. These moments, when the work of elaboration ceases and the presence of direct experience is felt, often create subtle but very significant turning points in a person's life. They connect us more deeply to our core sense of being, beyond the doing and elaborating, and enable a profound reorientation to occur. When we are ready for such moments, they can be deeply healing.

Authentic Movement

The discipline of Authentic Movement also offers a way to enter into direct experience. Authentic Movement was originally developed by pioneer dance therapist Mary Starks Whitehouse during the 1950's and 1960's. Mary studied and was deeply influenced by Jungian thought, and originally called her work active imagination in

movement, or movement in depth. Janet Adler, one of Whitehouse's foremost students, has further explored the relationship between mover and witness, and the mystical dimensions of this discipline (Pallaro, 1999).

Authentic Movement offers a simple form within which a mover and a witness engage together on a journey of uncovering a clear and compassionate place within themselves. The ground form involves one mover and one witness, although Authentic Movement can also be practised within a group, with either one or a circle of several witnesses being present for a group of movers. The witness holds the space, the safe container, into which the mover goes, eyes closed; within the sacred space of the witness circle, the mover invites the unconscious to speak through movement and stillness.

The mover attends to inner sensations, feelings, images, and movement impulses, listening and waiting for each impulse, allowing them to come into form through movement. The body, in its wisdom, tells the story needing to be told at this very moment. Memories, dream images, deep feelings, archetypal energies, ancient knowledge, ritual, song, play, laughter or tears, and healing moments may be evoked and find expression through the movement. It is the witness's embodied presence which enables the mover to surrender to the ongoing flow of information from the unconscious. Thus the body becomes conscious.

After the movement has ended, both mover and witness share their experience. Making conscious what was unconscious enables the mover to embrace lost or hidden aspects of himself. The witness pays attention to the sensations, feelings, memories, and images evoked in her by the presence of the mover, and learns to recognise and own her projections, interpretations, and judgments. As

witness, we seek to see the mover clearly, and as we do so, we find we also come to see ourself more clearly. The longing to be seen clearly by another transforms into the longing to see another clearly. At times mover and witness meet in moments of what Janet Adler calls unitive experience, as the internal witness within each person evolves.

The Experience of the Mover

Entering the empty circle as a mover, turning our attention inwards, we are generally confronted first of all with the subterranean gossip of the fifth skandha, erupting now and then in specific thought patterns or emotions. So long as we continue with this mental chatter, we will miss this unique moment - the shape the body makes as it stretches out along the ground; the smooth, cool texture of the floor; the gentle rise and fall of the belly as the body breathes; sunlight penetrating closed eyelids; a sudden soft breeze from an open window brushing the side of the face.

If - instead of rolling the head to the side to greet breeze and light, spreading the hand to feel more clearly the smoothness of the wooden floor, arching the spine to acknowledge the fullness of breath filling belly and chest - we continue to mull over the conversation we had three hours ago, and plan what we will cook tonight, we miss the magic and simplicity of the moment. By retreating into a non-existent past and future, we lose the direct experience of now.

But if we pay attention to those emerging movements and allow them space to develop, we engage with the uniqueness of the moment, and discover what the bodymind is truly experiencing. When we follow these small movements, letting each movement and each moment flow into the next, without holding on or pushing away, we may be surprised by an unconscious, unintended impulse which moves us from deep within. The unconscious meets the reality of the body ego, and a dialogue, a mutual education and integration, can occur (Chodorow, 1991). Through this practice of embodying, accepting, and allowing the process to unfold, we invite the possibility of transformation.

Often I hear students describe how they enter into the movement experience believing they feel one thing, but as they follow their moment-by-moment experience, they realise something completely different is actually going on. Where we believed we were stuck in a vague feeling of discontent, we find that, by moving from our inner impulses, from the deeper self, we can transform that feeling and belief through a direct experience of spaciousness, or physical strength, or tenderness, or clean cutting anger. A woman described how she believed she was not strong enough to stand on her own, but by embodying in movement her process as it evolved, moment-by-moment, she found that she did in fact have the resources to stand alone, and could change her belief system as a result of this direct, embodied experience.

The Art of Witnessing

Witnessing another's movement is a discipline which requires much practice; like meditation, it might take a lifetime and more to perfect. But we try our best to witness clearly, with

compassion and acceptance, and in so doing we gradually develop the ability to be present, in the moment, experiencing the moment directly, as it happens, without preconceptions and expectations, judgments, projections, or interpretations.

We do this by learning to recognise and own our projections, judgments, and interpretations. Many people, when they first experience the discipline of witnessing Authentic Movement, are shocked at the extent to which they judge, project into, and interpret the other's experience. It is important to accept that we all do this, most of the time; this is how we relate to each other and our world, and also how we learn to see ourselves more clearly. It is the natural way of ego development, and the process of the five skandhas at work, to make projections, judgments, and interpretations. It may also be a learnt skill of a therapist to make interpretations and judgments, based on a particular belief system and theory.

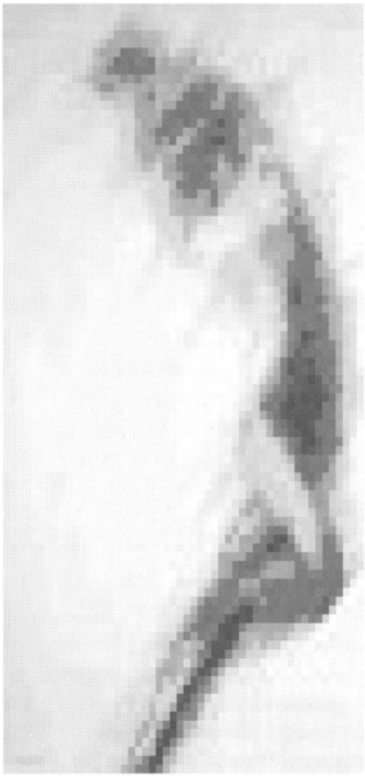
So first of all the witness must learn to have compassion for herself, not to judge herself too harshly for judging others, for we cannot learn to accept others if we cannot accept ourselves. Then she learns how to speak about her experience in a way that gives the mover space and freedom to acknowledge his own truth. The way we give language to our experience is crucial in this discipline; the witness seeks to speak about her own direct experience, not impose her experience onto the mover as if it were the mover's truth. We may speak about our responses to the mover, but we own them as our own.

For example, it can make a big difference to the mover whether he hears his witness say 'you look sad', rather than 'I feel the wish to comfort you'; or 'I see you stamp your foot and I think you must be angry', rather than 'I see you stamp your foot and my spine straightens, my hands clench, and I feel alert, expectant'. The first statement compresses space; the second opens and expands space.

As witness, I seek to give my fullest possible attention to the mover, as far as I am able. I track the actual movements that are made; this is important, as the body is the basis of the process, and for material to be integrated the process must be first embodied, then remembered.

I also pay attention to any sensations that may be evoked in me in the presence of the mover; proprioceptive or kinesthetic experiences within my own body, or sensory perceptions of space, light, sound, weight, and so on may all be included. An image might arise in my mind, or I might perceive a story unfolding as I witness the movement. All of these are acknowledged as my own experiences.

Sometimes, as witness, I may have an emotional response to the mover; I may feel fear, tenderness, compassion, anger, joy, and so on. Throughout all of this I try not to jump to hasty judgments, projecting my responses onto the mover, but give myself the space to feel each experience directly, as my own. As with the dismantling of sequences of skandha activity in meditation, I seek to simply let each experience be, in its own place, with its own intrinsic significance, without elaborating a



mountain of interpretations and beliefs about it.

Thoughts will arise; memories, associations, and insights will emerge. I simply let them be, and keep returning my attention to my body, my sensations, feelings, and the images evoked in the presence of the mover.

Therapeutic and Spiritual Practice

There is clearly a potential for therapeutic work in this practice; material from the unconscious arises and is embodied in movement, where it can be seen, felt, recognised, understood, and integrated into consciousness. Many therapists are using this simple but profound practice as a resource for their work. In particular, the dyadic form of one mover and one witness reflects and evokes the relationship of therapist and client. For many people, bodily movement offers a direct and powerful way to access unconscious material, though it must be understood that this is not work for the borderline or psychotic person, or a vulnerable client who needs to strengthen ego boundaries, not loosen them.

Especially in long-term work, transference and countertransference issues may arise. Through constant witnessing of her own psychological and somatic responses, the witness-therapist monitors this; and through the owning of her experience, her mover-client is enabled to more fully acknowledge his own unique experience and to recognise both his individuality and his relationship to another.

Authentic Movement is also a discipline of mindfulness training. I liken it to a meditation practice done in the presence of, and in relation to another. It has been called a 'feminine form of Zen'. As mover, through the experience of being witnessed by another, with acceptance and compassion, my own internal witness can develop. As witness, I train myself to become aware of my direct experience, in the presence of the mover, and come to recognise the mover within myself. In moments of clear seeing, we are distinct but not separate - we are two and one. When practised in a group, Authentic Movement facilitates a deepening sense of community, as conscious awareness within the collective body evolves.

Training in direct embodied experience gives a secure grounding for these moments of intuitive knowing where duality, for a moment, falls away, and we dance together in a shared truth. The miracle of the bodymind and its senses serve as an open doorway into mystical experience, which is always direct experience.

Further Reading

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