

## The Spiritual and the Psychological Meet: Lessons from Winnicott for Students of Awareness Practices

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*This article examines some of the learning that D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic model offers for students of awareness practices such as Gesture of Awareness, a practice with roots in Sensory Awareness and Buddhism. In particular, the question of how an understanding of our conditioned patterns can inform our capacity to open to non-dual presence or awareness is explored.*

There is much talk of globalization these days — of the rapid transmigration of culture and even economic contagion as we witnessed in the 2008 financial crisis — with attention increasingly focused on the meeting of East and West and what this portends for both hemispheres going forward. Another way of looking at this may be to see East and West as ultimately representing two different aspects of ourselves. As John Wellwood suggests, 'If the East has focused on the *vertical*, timeless dimension, the West has focused on the *horizontal* — the individual's life as it unfolds in time.'<sup>i</sup> While the Eastern wisdom traditions have illuminated unconditioned awareness, Western psychology has focused on the conditioned mind, our 'stories' and the principle of individuation, in keeping with the centrality of individualism in Western philosophical thought.

As we look to expand our awareness and act skillfully in our daily lives, we are essentially needing to develop and integrate both aspects: the Absolute vertical and the relative horizontal. Just as wisdom and method in the Buddhist tradition are separate and yet related, two and yet one, so too is there a symbiotic relationship between the relative and Absolute levels of our experience and development.

Gesture of Awareness, a practice with roots in Sensory Awareness in the tradition of Elsa Gindler and Charlotte Selver, and infused with Buddhist philosophy, cultivates an awareness of pure presence in the body — a quality of presence devoid of all association with time, place or concept. <sup>ii</sup>In Gesture of Awareness, akin to Sensory Awareness, students are guided in developing the capacity to more deeply sense and respond to the organic realities of the present moment, i.e. to the ongoing dynamics of gravity, breathing, balance, energy, touch, movement, and the like. Exploring deceptively simple sensory movements and awareness (Charlotte Selver called them 'experiments'), habitual thoughts and tensions melt into the background as one becomes more aware and grounded in the present. The work gradually allows one to embody more physical and emotional ease and authenticity in daily life.

The question that arises, and the subject of this article, is what inhibits our ability to realize this quality of presence in our lives. Charles Genoud, who founded Gesture of Awareness, offers the following, 'if we don't have at our disposal the fullness of consciousness because there are too many blocks within ourselves, we may

meditate diligently, but it does not help. We need to free the consciousness or presence that is blocked.’<sup>iii</sup> He makes the same point using the language of Jungian psychology, ‘we can dream about the fullness of presence, about awareness, but we also know there are areas where awareness is not available to us at this time because it is captured. Some immeasurable amount of awareness is caught in a shadow.’<sup>iv</sup>

From this perspective, we cannot make progress on the spiritual path as long as we are not also developing an understanding of the ‘shadow’ aspects of ourselves. We need to be aware of the *contents* of our experience and how they bind us in order to free ourselves of their bondage. This involves shining the light on the darkness, on those unintegrated shadow aspects that tend to be driven underground, often including both so-called negative and positive attributes.

Practices such as Gesture of Awareness are focused on cultivating presence or awareness in the vertical domain, while also gently uncovering insight into the way in which the storyline of our horizontal experience in time captures our awareness and detracts from our ability to be present. In the vertical, the focus is on the awareness of the experiencer, *how* one is experiencing, while in the horizontal the focus is on the *contents* of one’s experience. Cultivating this shift from the contents of experience to the *awareness* of the experiencer is a central tenet of Buddhism.

As we look to Western psychological models to help us understand how our awareness is captured by the shadow or the unconscious, the work of D.W. Winnicott provides worthwhile insight. Winnicott was a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst born in Plymouth in 1896. World War I interrupted his studies at Cambridge University and he later completed his medical training at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. Winnicott came across Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1919, which made a powerful impression on him. He knew he had found his calling. He had a long-standing, though sometimes difficult, professional association with Melanie Klein who had settled in London in the 1920s. He particularly valued her contribution in the earliest stages of their professional relationship; ‘her way of making inner psychic reality very real.’<sup>v</sup> They were two of the leading figures in the British Psychoanalytical Society at the time.

For Winnicott, psychological health was a function of ‘good-enough mothering’ and what he termed the *transitional space* between mother and child. His focus was on the decisive importance of the earliest stages of development of a child. For Winnicott the absolute *dependency* of the infant on the primary caregiver for his/her survival was the critical factor in development, as dependency demanded compliance.

He wrote of the importance of the interaction between mother and child providing a *continuity of being* that he saw as vital to the psychological health of a person. For Winnicott, all psychopathology emanates from a rupture in this key care-giving relationship. He says in ‘*The Mind and its Relation to the Psyche-Soma* (1949):

[T]hat health in the early development of the individual entails continuity of being. The early psyche-soma proceeds along a certain line of development provided its continuity of being is not disturbed; in other words for the healthy development of the early psyche-soma there is a need for a perfect environment. At first the need is absolute. The perfect environment is one that adapts to the needs of the newly formed psyche-soma, that which we as observers know to be the infant at the start. A bad environment is bad because by failure to adapt it becomes an impingement to which the psyche-soma (i.e. the infant) must react. *This reacting disturbs the continuity of the going on being of the individual.*<sup>vi</sup> [italics added]

In the environment where the infant's needs are not accommodated, but rather where the child is required to *react* to the environment in order to survive, *coping becomes a substitute for being*. The need for reaction is seen as a loss of identity. Adam Phillips, in his well-respected biography of Winnicott and his work (Phillips, 1988), elaborates further:

If the environmental failure is severe — beyond the infant's comprehension — then, he will, in despair, develop a militant fantasy of self-sufficiency in which the mind will be used not to continue the mother's care but to displace it altogether. What Winnicott calls the psyche ... becomes dissociated from the body and a kind of uprooted mental functioning evolves that is, Winnicott believed 'an encumbrance to the psyche-soma or to the individual being's continuity of being which constitutes the self.' The psyche attempts to disown the body which, due to maternal neglect, is felt to be a persecutor.<sup>vii</sup>

In this way, Winnicott identifies the cause of much of the neurosis of the hyper-mental modern person, who is well-developed intellectually but, having disowned the body, sees his/her salvation in mental activity and has little to no experience of the freedom that 'going on being' brings to one's life. It is this *continuity of being* which is cultivated in awareness practices such as Gesture of Awareness. The practice creates a container for a 'transitional space' of a kind that promotes practitioners' cultivation of their own capacity for 'going on being' while in the company of others.

For Winnicott, the adaptive mechanism is characterized by what he called the False Self, an aspect of the persona that is 'habituated through early environmental failure to living reactively.'<sup>viii</sup> He described the False Self as having three functions:<sup>ix</sup>

- It attends, within severe limitations, to the mother;
- It hides and protects the True Self by complying with environmental demands; and
- It is also a 'caretaker', taking over the caring function of the environment that has failed.

The False Self acts as a primitive form of self-sufficiency in the absence of nurture.<sup>x</sup> Both Klein and Winnicott wrote influential papers on the Manic Defense in which they describe the way in which a child mobilizes defenses of a manic nature that are directed against experiencing the psychic reality of depressive pain. The main characteristic of this defense is a *denial* of psychic reality. Winnicott suggests that the infant may use *fantasy* or the *external world* as escape routes from the stress of the inner world. In this case, the function of daydreaming is to protect the child from overwhelming inner pain.<sup>xi</sup> The fantasy world of Hollywood and novels are our age's response to this need for an escape route into daydreaming and fantasy.

The other option, flight into the external world, is often affirmed by our society today, as a high level of mental development and materially productive energy often accompanies it.

Winnicott describes the True Self as 'a continuity of being' that is 'in health based on psyche-soma growth ... there is no localization of the mind itself, and there is nothing that can be called a mind.'<sup>xii</sup> The True Self is the source of spontaneity and authenticity in a person. 'Only the True Self can be creative', Winnicott asserts, and 'Only the True Self can feel real.'<sup>xiii</sup> Winnicott sees the True Self as a movable feast, an organic 'unknowable' entity. Adams describes how the final decade of Winnicott's work was marked 'by a profound ambivalence about the knowability of the self.'<sup>xiv</sup>

Winnicott's contributions to psychoanalytic theory all derived from his way of making sense of what mothers did for their infants. In 'The Mirror Role', Winnicott suggests that 'the precursor of the 'mirror' is the mother's face and that the mother's role [is] of giving back to the baby the baby's own self.'<sup>xv</sup> In this sense, the child can only discover what he feels by seeing it reflected back. If the mother is sufficiently responsive, the child experiences himself being 'seen for what he in fact [is] at any moment.'<sup>xvi</sup> If the infant is seen in a way that makes her feel she exists, in a way that confirms her, she is free to go on looking.<sup>xvii</sup> Not to be seen by the mother, at least at the moment of spontaneous gesture, is *not to exist*. In Winnicott's account, being seen by the mother is being recognized for who one is, and what the infant is, is what she feels. For him, everything hinged on the 'changeover from mother as a subjective object to an object objectively perceived; from seeing through the other, to seeing the other.'<sup>xviii</sup>

Where this 'mirroring' by the mother has been disrupted for some reason, the role of psychoanalysis is to play not only an interpretative function but also to replicate this 'mirroring' role in therapy in 'the provision of a holding environment analogous to maternal care'<sup>xix</sup>. By engaging in psychoanalysis in this way, the therapist 'mirrors' the client and helps her to develop a *coherent narrative* that affirms her True Self. This reflects the need of a young child for an adult to hold together the threads of her experience, to form a narrative continuity.<sup>xx</sup> For these reasons, Winnicott felt that therapy could not be confined to a technique of professional help, but was rather a question of the 'affinity between two people.'<sup>xxi</sup> In this way, he also introduces the importance of the non-verbal, relational quality of therapy.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, the client is always suffering from the *self-knowledge he has had to refuse himself*.<sup>xxii</sup> Another way to express this would be to say that the person's innate wisdom has been obscured by early childhood adaptation required for survival. Therapy is a method of addressing this with the therapist facilitating the patient's endeavors to reclaim the lost aspects of herself, and thereby helping to establish a *continuity of being* rooted in authenticity and realness.

The Eastern meditative traditions offer other methods, including meditation, to cultivate this innate wisdom and self-knowledge. Gesture of Awareness includes a relational aspect as one works in small groups of two or three within the context of a larger group. In the practice, one is invited to explore one's own experience of presence while interacting with others, while moving the arm of another for example. This cultivates an integration of awareness in daily life and in the myriad relationships that make up our relative existence. Charles Genoud describes the practice in the following way:

In the deepest sense, Gesture of Awareness means body of presence, *awareness in motion*, with no one to move, no one moving, no one painting, nothing painted. Either we are walking as the beginning of something, and we are looking for something, or we are walking as our only reality, now, for eternity. Our reality is we are walking now; there is no other reality for us. Nothing else exists. We are only walkers.<sup>xxiii</sup>

It would seem that in our efforts to achieve the quality of presence described above, we could benefit a great deal from understanding what captures our awareness in the name of psychological defense.

Personally, I have found the symbiotic dynamic between psychological insight and absolute awareness to be a very rich exploration. Spiritual exploration without psychological work leads to 'spiritual by-passing', i.e. attempting to side step the need to dive into the depths of one's defenses. On the other hand, focusing on the psychological domain to the exclusion of the spiritual can leave us trapped in a gilded cage, forever dissecting and analyzing our story in ever-more elegant ways. While the psychological dimension offers us insight into the aspect of our awareness that is 'captured' and hence unavailable for presence in our lives, the spiritual dimension brings an expansive understanding of what lies *beyond* our stories, what is possible when we step beyond, not aside from, our conditioned patterns.

This *interplay* between the psychological and the spiritual seems to be of utmost relevance today. True integrated personal development and expansion of consciousness can only happen when we open ourselves to both dimensions.

The study of Winnicott suggests that 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerners have much to learn from our collective penchant for fantasy and compulsive activity. Are they perhaps the *maladies du jour* that hold the keys to understanding the pursuit of happiness in the modern era? My own experience suggests there is truth in this.

The product of a rupture in my capacity for 'being' caused, in part, by an overwhelmed mother, I wandered in the desert of hyper-mental focus and constant activity, seeking solace in spiritual endeavors and also in body-oriented practices like yoga, chi gung and Gesture of Awareness. I persevered with a disciplined meditation practice but, alas, it could only take me so far until I dove into the deep psychological work that unveiled the primal emotions of fear, rage and vulnerability that had been so hidden by my elaborate childhood defenses.

I stand now at the threshold of a new dawn and wonder if it could be any easier for others that walk this path. I would certainly offer that spiritual progress can only be made if we are willing to cultivate psychological awareness in equal measure.

Realizing a deep quality of love and expanded awareness in our daily lives is a product of a commitment to both psychological and spiritual exploration. At the heart of this work is the realization that only by developing a coherent narrative for ourselves can we transcend it: our freedom lies in being very intimately acquainted with our story and then simply letting it dissolve much like a Tibetan sand mandala is created with painstaking attention to detail and then dissolved into the ocean or the ether.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Wellwood, J. 2000. *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* Boston: Shambhala Publications

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://www.sensoryawareness.org/> and [http://www.vimalakirtiusa.org/index\\_test.html](http://www.vimalakirtiusa.org/index_test.html)).

<sup>iii</sup> Genoud, C. 2008. *Manual for the Practice of Gesture of Awareness – Volume 1* Boston, MA

<sup>iv</sup> Genoud, C. 2009. *Manual for the Practice of Gesture of Awareness – Volume 2* Boston, MA

<sup>v</sup> Phillips, A. 1988. *Winnicott* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press p. 46

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 95

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 94-95

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.* p. 134

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xi Ibid. pp. 57-59

xii Ibid. p. 96

xiii Ibid. p. 135

xiv Ibid. p. 143

xv Ibid. p. 128

xvi Ibid. p. 129

xvii Ibid. p. 128

xviii Ibid. p. 130

xix Ibid. p. 11

xx Ibid. p. 66

xxi Ibid. p. 25

xxii Ibid. p. 53

xxiii Genoud, C. 2009. Manual for the Practice of Gesture of Awareness – Volume 2  
Boston, MA pp.7