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Transforming Dualism:

Esalen's role in developing a field of Embodied Theory and Practice

Two themes:

1. how Esalen figured in the construction of a new field of academic, clinical, and scientific study of a wide variety of body practices developed in Europe and the New Worlds (US, Australia, Latin America) during the past 150 years;
2. the role played by Esalen in a revolution in the dominant paradigm of thinking about the nature of embodiment.

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The Creation of a New Discipline

In November 1988 I was invited to give the keynote address for the first annual conference of the European Association of Somatic Therapy in Paris. It was during Armistice Week. While we give a cursory day to this event, Europeans understandably give a full week to memories of the World Wars, with veterans marching in the streets of every village, bands, speeches, most businesses suspended. The atmosphere was such that it was impossible to avoid thoughts of how the wars affected the shaping of this new field.

There were some 500 people at the conference, mostly scholars and university students. In attendance were many of the old pioneers of what we have come to call “Somatics”: Gerda Boyesen with her flaming red hair, Gerda Alexander with her aching feet, many of the original students of Moshe Feldenkrais, Wilhelm Reich, Elsa Gindler, Mary Wigman and Rudolf v. Laban.

The organizer, a French Lacanian psychoanalyst, had written an introduction to the conference program, which attempted to situate this new movement in human transformation within a historical context. I was somewhat startled when I read his summary that there are three sources of the field: the work of Wilhelm Reich and SexPol; American Indians; and Esalen.

Easy enough to understand the first. Wilhelm Reich inspired widespread movements throughout Europe with his vision that healthy adult sexuality and healthy societies required vibrant orgasms, perinatal care, attention to early childhood development, and orgone therapy. Throughout Europe to this day, one finds birth-control clinics, preschools, birthing centers, and grade schools inspired by his ideas, as well as political movements oriented towards changing laws surrounding birth control, abortion, divorce, and sexual behavior. There has been an easy relationship between Reichian theory and the many methods of working with the body-personality using breath, sensory awareness, manipulative strategies, movement practices, and visualizations. Unlike the situation in the United States where his work became medicalized and focused on individual psychotherapy, his original theory, preserved by the Europeans, has the space for a wide range of practices.

With not too great a mental stretch, I was able to make sense of the American Indian factor. Native Americans are of great interest to European intellectuals. Old folks from the rez in jeans and cowboy hats are often invited to lecture to wide-eyed deconstructionists in European universities. In Vienna, Paris, and Rome there are large bookstores devoted exclusively to books on “Shamanism.” There is a perception that the Native Americans have maintained a sense of connection with the body and the earth that was lost by the Christianized and scientized Western Europeans and the early colonists.

But what about Esalen?

Living in the atmosphere of Armistice Week gave me a sense of the impact of the wars on the history of Somatics. Before and between the two wars, Western Europe had witnessed the origins of a widespread practical and theoretical critique of the concretization of body-mind dualism in medicine, education, philosophy, and bodily practices (dance, exercise, sports).

19th Century innovators like Jacques Dalcroze, François Delsarte, and Leo Koffler created schools of “Gymnastic” which taught exercises designed to give the body its own modes of expression, freed from the rigid concepts of classical dance and military formalism. Mary Wigman, Isadora Duncan, and Rudolf v. Laban created a revolution in classical dance by putting emphasis on cultivation of the innate expressiveness of the natural, unshod body. These and other teachers created the great pre-Woodstock summer gatherings of the Wandervogel, where tens of thousands of young people celebrated bodily expression, nudity, and free sex; a tragic era soon to bifurcate into the Nazi and Communist Youth movements, where attention to bodies and the earth were swallowed

up by political fanaticism. Inspired in part by the late David Bohm, who saw dualism as having all the earmarks of addiction, I have thought of this movement as the origins of an extended recovery program from a certain dissociated sickness of Western thought forms, akin to the AA 12-step programs.

The rise of Hitler and Stalin had a devastating impact on this movement, which, though marginal, was growing in power to reshape the major institutions of medicine, education, and religion. Many of the innovators had to flee from their homelands, dispersing throughout the Americas and Australia, and the public collaborations were finished for the time. Refugees like Charlotte Selver, Carola Speads, Fritz Perls, and Marion Rosen went from being active participants in a vital cultural movement to practicing their work in isolation with handfuls of students, while trying to gain a financial foothold in their new and unfamiliar homes. At the same time, the Flexner-Gates report, commissioned by Andrew Carnegie and John Rockefeller, had established in this country the hegemony of European academic medicine rooted in the Cartesian division between the “*res extensa* (the body conceived mechanistically), and the “*res cogitans* (the mind, imagination, feeling). State by state, laws were passed outlawing any practices that were judged to be at odds with this imported biomedicine. Ida Rolf, F.M. Alexander, Alexander Lowen, John Pierrakos, the osteopathic heirs of Alexander Still were confined to quiet teaching and work in anonymous offices far from the public dialogue, often living for years within blocks of one another without any contact.

In this environment, somewhat like an alchemical alembic, the various works did indeed simmer quietly, with skills being honed, goals purified. But they had little, if any, effects on the larger culture, and like any enclosed community became cultish.

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In December 1963, in the second year of Esalen's formal programs, Michael Murphy began what would grow into a regathering of the fragments dispersed by the war by inviting Charlotte Selver and Fritz Perls to do a workshop. Charlotte, 102 years old this month, is the clearest embodiment of this rich movement. She had been an active participant in the summer rallies of the Wandervogel where she encountered the Sensory Awareness work of Else Gindler, who became her teacher. She taught at the Bauhaus during the fertile Weimar period, and finally left Germany for New York in 1938 when her University of Heidelberg required her to wear the Jewish star. Supporting herself by cleaning apartments, she slowly worked her way into the intellectual community of New York and began teaching her work more publicly, attracting the support of better-known refugees like Erich Fromm. Alan Watts, then on his houseboat in Sausalito, heard of her work, invited her to California, and thence to Esalen.

Charlotte was the first in a long series of teachers of body practices that would visit Esalen regularly: Moshe Feldenkrais, Ida Rolf, Alexander Lowen, Anna Halprin, Gabrielle Roth, Ilana Rubinfeld, Judith Aston, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Emilie Conrad, Fritz Smith, ...

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When I first began encountering these teachers and experiencing their practices in 1967, I had two reactions.

1. I was appalled by the virulent fragmentation among the various teachers and their schools, redolent of the fragmentation of the Christian churches.
2. I was stunned by the brilliance of their work, particularly its impact on my sense of self and the renewal of a flagging spiritual journey.

The fragmentation I saw among these cranky people was redolent of the theological disputes of the late Middle Ages, almost surreal in specificity about body parts. Ida Rolf dismissed F. M. Alexander as having the third lumbar and third cervical vertebrae move back too far from an imaginary vertical plumb line through the body; Moshe Feldenkrais argued that there was no point working on body structure, which could only be changed through changing function, and made fun of Rolfers and Aston Patterners as people who were devoid of imagination about all the possible ways one might move. Rolf and Aston countered that functional changes were trivial and evanescent. Stanley Keleman argued that Rolfers and Alexander teachers were like crazed arborists crashing into forests to straighten out the redwood trees. Charlotte Selver disdained them all as vulgar and insensitive louts. Most of them argued that psychotherapy was made irrelevant by their practices, since all emotional problems would be resolved by improving the flow of cerebrospinal fluid, aligning the body with gravity, or introducing more flexibility into the joints. Ida Rolf often said, “There ain’t no psychology; just biology.” The claims of each bordered on the megalomania bred of isolation. Not only did they reject the methods of their peers, they also disdained older

practices from other cultures such as hatha yoga and tai chi which they considered anachronistic. It was a collection of body churches, each arguing dogmatic superiority.

What happened in the late 1960s and throughout the 70s at Esalen was something like what happened to give rise to the ecumenical movement in religion. This strange collection of weird inventors suddenly found themselves in the same dining room, sometimes crowded into sitting with undesirables of a competitive school. When they were relaxed off their teaching roles eating and drinking, they found that other very creative and courageous people had ideas about the body that were not all that different from their own, and that they too had something important to offer a damaged world. Even when they did not directly interact, they could not avoid thinking about each other because their students were always interacting and posing questions that arose from the different teachings. The primacy of structure or function? The need for catharsis or not? Does direct work with the body displace the need for depth psychoanalysis? Is touch inherently intrusive? And like embattled Christians, they began to realize that there differences among each other were trivial compared to the radical gap between their shared vision of the human body and the dominant paradigm.

At this stage, which lasted throughout the 1970s, there was only an inchoate community around these practices, interacting, raising questions and arguments, students cross-training. But there was little conceptual work moving towards an understanding of what the various works shared. Moreover, even to this day, body workers and somatics innovators are by proclivity not very verbal, and when they speak, they are often unskilled in language and its nuances. With little documentation, it has been difficult to

sustain and develop a critical dialogue building on clinical cases and reflective inquiry. And it has been hard for outsiders really to appreciate what is happening.

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There has also been an epistemological challenge having to do with the role of experiential practices in relation to concepts. Esalen has been a place where experimental practices occurring within a reflective communal atmosphere have taken precedence over pre-existing theories imported whole-cloth from the old worlds, East and West. Somatics has its unique flavor from the fact that professionals identified with this field are involved in methodical investigation of many regions of bodily experience through long-term skillful practices in an attitude of experimentation, continually submitting their conceptual frameworks to the information freshly revealed by sustained practice.

It is only in the last half of the 20th Century that Western scholars began to take seriously the inherent intellectual meaning of practices through the work of people like Marcel Mauss, Mary Douglas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. In the dominant mode of thinking, practice is always being interpreted in light of pre-existing theory, as instances or concretizations of intellectually articulated structures. Mauss began a tradition that studied the intricacies of specific practices as sources of new understandings, as containing within themselves notions not fully articulated unless the practices are investigated in their own right. So, for example, it has been a commonplace mistake to situate Somatics exclusively within a psychoanalytic framework, failing to take into account that many schools of body practice have nothing at all to do with the psychoanalytic view of the person. It is within this context, particularly Bourdieu's theory of practice, that one might understand more clearly how

the seemingly chaotic mix of charismatic teachers and their newly trained practitioners mixing together on the Esalen grounds led to the creation of a new academic discipline with advanced university degree programs, publicly sanctioned forms of therapy, and scientific inquiry. The progress over a 35-year period at Esalen of a two-pronged movement—one reflective, theoretical, scientific; the other, refinement of practical skill—represents a characteristically American approach to theory-construction, the robust intellectual pragmatist tradition articulated by William James, C. S. Peirce, and John Dewey. Knowledge, in this tradition, gets its validation in experiential action, which, upon reflection, reshapes pre-existing words and theories.¹

Various steps in gathering together the fragmentary notions embodied in various schools of practical work were taken by a handful of us starting in the 1970s, extending up until the present time. These included publishing historical and theoretical essays, establishing study seminars among teachers of the various schools, dialogues between the teachers and scholars from other areas, and research seminars between the major teachers and biomedical researchers and researchers in the social sciences.

A crucial step was the late Thomas Hanna's creation of the notion of Somatics as the name and unifying principle of the field.

In the 1960s, while chair of the philosophy department at the University of Florida, Hanna had gone off for eight weeks to Guadalajara with a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies to write *Bodies in Revolt*, significantly subtitled “*The evolution-revolution of 20th century man toward the SOMATIC CULTURE of the 21st century [sic]*”. It was a wildly passionate and characteristically cantankerous essay

on a series of thinkers, who, he argued, represent resistance to the mind-body dualism infecting Western thought—Darwin, Freud, Konrad Lorenz, Piaget, Wilhelm Reich, Kierkegaard, Marx, Ernst Cassirer, Albert Camus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He argued that the complex of ideas set in motion by these figures was setting the stage for a radical revolution in the way culture thinks about the bodily existence, and the institutions rooted in that thinking.

Hanna made his first visit to Esalen a short time after this book was published. Like many of us at the time who went there as professional philosophers, he was surprised to find non-academic artisans actually doing existentialism and phenomenology in the flesh, without knowing much about the larger philosophical, historical, and cultural significance of what they were doing. Inspired by what he saw there, he went on to create the journal *Somatics*, the first public forum for practitioners in the many individual schools to engage in a common dialogue. He wrote a seminal series of essays on the unity of the field, using the neologism “Somatics”, in contrast to the more common "somatic" (an adjective synonymous with "physical" or more technically, "the musculoskeletal frame of the body"). He defined it in this way:

"the field which studies the *soma*: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception."

He was inspired in that definition by Edmund Husserl, who in the 1920s proposed what he called a "somatology," an agenda for a study of the relationships between knowledge derived from direct bodily experience and scientific studies of the body. These phrases originate in the classical Greek contrast between the dead body, *necros*,

and the enspirited person, *soma*.² That "somatology" would stand as a corrective to what might be called a "necrology," the body of medical science whose fundamental ideas about body parts and their structures have been derived from the dissection and analysis of corpses.

With Thomas Hanna's journal and philosophical essays and my own, in addition to the ongoing proliferation of skill-development in different methods of body practice, the conditions were set for the marriage of the two prongs of this movement, practice and theory, issuing in a new field of inquiry with Esalen as its home.

In 1983, I founded the first graduate studies program in the field, then located at Antioch's San Francisco campus, bankrupted in 1989, and now is at CIIS, thanks to Robert McDermott. I was invited to be a member of a 3-person committee of the State legislature, charged with revising the laws governing the practice of counseling. That appointment enabled me to make legal space for the incorporation of body practices in the scope of practice of legitimate psychotherapy. In 1987, at Michael's invitation, I organized at Esalen the first of many ecumenical seminars in the field, inviting scholars and scientists in many fields to interact with the creators of the major schools of Somatics. The journal, the graduate program, and the ongoing seminars, and Michael's *The Future of the Body* have issued in a dramatic change in the collection of these schools. It is now commonplace both for teachers and practitioners to consider themselves as specialists in a more generalized field, and to engage in collaborative activities involving shared needs for education and research. There are now a number of

graduate programs in the field, yearly national and international congresses, and many books and articles.

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Reconceiving the theoretical gap between “Body” and “Spirit”

When I first went to Esalen in 1967 and encountered these practices, I was a Jesuit seminarian in my final stages of preparation for ordination to the priesthood, and had been schooled for some 12 years in a body-oriented spirituality of which Michael writes in *The Future of the Body*. In contentious, often violent, contrast with Protestant theology, Roman Catholics, particularly of the mystical tradition into which I had been initiated, took literally the Pauline claim that the resurrection of Christ’s body is the promise of our immortal existence in the flesh. In light of that fundamental notion, we believed that taking the Eucharist was actually eating Christ’s body to transform our own bodies into the immortal body of Christ. Our spiritual teachers had put great emphasis on this transformation through meditation and the sacraments, and in that context considered diet, relaxation methods, visualizations, hypnosis, and exercise to be part of this great transformative process. In this vein, we learned meditation practices grounded in sensory awareness; and we practiced deliberate postures in meditation associated with desired states of consciousness. We were enticed with promises of the kinds of bodily transformation that occur in the documentation of the lives of the saints: teleportation,

elongation, levitation, sweet smelling body odor, and ultimately an immortal body of blissful pleasure or excruciating pain.

But there was a profound contradiction between these very bodily teachings and the radical dualism of body/soul; temporal earth/eternal heaven and hell. The practices designed for embodiment were paradoxically disembodied, existing in an ethereal closet, neither physical nor spiritual. Carl Jung expresses it very clearly in his introduction to Richard Wilhelm's translation of the Secret of the Golden Flower where he says that the West has all the meditation practices which can be found in Asia, but it lacks techniques for preparing the body for those practices. As soon as I encountered these various teachers of body practices and learned how to pay attention to breathing, standing, being deeply touched, moving with awareness, . . . , my fourteen years of spiritual teaching suddenly literally made sense.

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Yasuo Yuasa is a Japanese scholar of Asian bodily practices. He argues that the most profound difference between Asian and European intellectual traditions lies in the priority given to practice in relation to generating theory:

What might we discover to be the philosophical uniqueness of Eastern thought? One revealing characteristic is that personal 'cultivation' is presupposed in the philosophical foundation of Eastern theories. To put it simply, true knowledge cannot be obtained simply by means of theoretical thinking, but only through 'bodily recognition or realization,' that is, through the utilization of one's total mind and body. Simply stated, this is to 'learn with the body,' not the brain.

Cultivation is a practice that attempts, so to speak, to achieve true knowledge by means of one's total mind and body.³

The break between theory and practice, he argues, reflects the Cartesian gap between mind and body, where theory is the principle of rational order; and practice is merely the shaping of so-called “chaotic” experience by the mind. In that view, experiential practices have no intrinsic intelligibility apart from the theories that shape them. An implication of his analysis has to do with the revisioning of body practices and spirituality. If you examine any of the Asian practices—tea ceremony, poetry writing, martial arts, meditation, healing practices—you find a seamless continuum from what Westerners would call the “physical” to the “spiritual.” There is, for example, a highly refined emphasis on bodily posture, diet, and tonicity, reflected in the minute attention to aesthetic detail. At the same time, a practitioner is required to deal with mental and emotional barriers to ethical behavior. Ultimately, any of these practices contain within the practice itself a cosmic dimension, a sense of harmony with reality, and all that entails. There is no division of worlds in which some activities are thought to be purely physical, others emotional, others mental, others spiritual. These are all aspects of a sustained practice of cultivation.

Yuasa's analysis makes sense of how these various practitioners experienced and thought about their works. The development of Somatics is better understood in comparison with body practices in Asia—martial arts, hatha yoga, meditation practices, manipulative techniques, traditional non-medical acupuncture—than with so-called healing practices alternative to biomedicine, or to Western physical therapy.

What is little known to the public is that each of the various founders and pioneers of the Somatics methods had a transgressive spiritual vision, not fulfilled by any established institution. One of the most profoundly unifying notions of the field is that experiential and methodical journeys into breathing, sensing, moving, touching, cellular pulsation, ... are revelatory not only of emotional stories and releases from traumatic scars, but also of the depths of what people in various traditions have called the corridors of spirit: spaciousness, cosmic connection, compassion, acceptance of what is. Those of us who have been attracted to these teachers in the 1960s were refugees from one or another formal religion. We were more drawn by those visions of a new kind of grounded spirituality, longing as we were for something to fill the emptiness we felt having left behind the religions of our forefathers, than we were by any therapeutic claims.

Because the languages of these various works are in the vocabularies of the body—names of muscles, bones, senses, anatomical parts, cells, organs—those who stood outside these works easily pigeonholed them into the old mailboxes where “body,” “mind,” and “spirit,” were the lazy ways of organizing them.

The development of Ashtanga and Iyengar Yoga are illuminating comparisons to what happened at Esalen in the transition from a random collection of different experiential practices to a unified field within a spiritual context. N. E. Sjöman paints a picture of the mid-19th Century Mysore Palace as not unlike Esalen, a place where refugees from the collapse of the Vijayanagara kingdom were given the opportunity by the raja, Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, and his successors to create a renaissance in

painting, music, literature, and architecture. In that fertile environment, where British gymnastic was being taught alongside the older tradition of Patanjali's yoga, Krishnamacariar and Pattabhi Jois developed a number of new asanas that eventually became systematized into what we now know as Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga. Sjoman argues that the hundreds of Ashtanga and Iyengar Yoga postures represent the results of creative syntheses of the older and more parsimonious Patanjali series of asanas with the practices of British gymnastics, and sees this as a completely natural process of development.

The tendency of most students of yoga has been to follow a linear tradition instead of a dynamic tradition. It seems to me that lineal traditions are oriented towards accumulation and that dynamic traditions are vitally initiated by introspection. . . . This is a perspective which would allow a tradition to evolve, to be creative; indeed, to survive. ⁴

The fecund synthesis of classical yoga and British gymnastic mirrors the kinds of interactive events in that gave rise to the Somatics movement. It also gives a sense of how the creation of new seemingly banal kinds of stretches, gestures, and touches might carry new spiritual meanings.

The outside observer trying to conceptualize the significance of the vast number of body-oriented practices crafted during the past 100 years can be trapped within either the classic Platonic animalistic framework, or the more modern Cartesian mechanistic grid. In the first, these body practices—movement, sensory awareness, breathing, touch—are seen as new forms of Athenian gymnastics where oiled naked men wrestled with

each other, preparing their bodies for the musical, mathematical, and mystical arts of the spirit. The body was thought of as a wild and vital animal, with juices that needed to be kept from spilling over and soiling mind and spirit. Christian monks left behind the oil and put on clothes, but still thought of training the body as a preparation for a life of the spirit. Monastic practices of fasting, ritualistic postures, sensory awareness meditations, breathing methods were thought to still the wild storms of the body so that the sounds of the quiet spirit might be heard.

To the more modern thinker under the sway of Descartes and Galileo, the body has been purged of animal mythology and remains a destitute machine—pumps, pulleys, chips, electronic signals. Like our computers and automobiles, our bodies must indeed be kept in good shape so that we can engage in the truly human level of reading, writing, and thinking. Without health and vitality, those important activities cannot take place.

And yet, to those of us on the inside, something else more profound is afoot, hard to express in old phrases. Perhaps easiest to approach by simply engaging in a linguistic ascetic where “body” “spirit” “mind” and “soul” are not allowed; by refusing to indulge in such easy phrases as “integrating body, mind, and spirit.” As some of us have forced ourselves to find other phrases to describe what is going on here, we have begun to articulate the richness of the knowledge that has grown in this unique place and beautiful place on the edge of the Western world.

ENDNOTES

¹ Two books that give a very important picture of the relationships between American philosophy and Somatics are: Thomas Hanna's *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking* (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970); Bruce W. Wilshire's *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy: Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Native American Thought* (Harrisburg, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

²Thomas Hanna, "What is Somatics?", *Somatics* (Spring/Summer 1986), pp. 4-8; Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Third Book. Also, *Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences.*, trans. Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), ppar. 2, 3. Cited by Elizabeth Behnke, "On the intertwining of phenomenology and somatics," *The Newsletter of the Study Project in Phenomenology of the Body*, 6:1 (Spring, 1993), p. 11. For an analysis of the Greek tradition, see the references in *The Corinthian Body*, Dale B. Martin (New Haven: Yale, 1995), footnote nine for Chapter Five, p. 271.

³ Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, trans. Nagatomo Shigenori and T. PL. Kasulis, (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 25. See also his *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, trans. Nagatomo Shigenori and Monte Hull (New York: SUNY Press, 1993).

⁴ N. E. Sjoman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1996), p. 60