

## **SOME REMARKS ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE BODY**

*Timo Klemola, PhD  
The University of Tampere*

In this article I'll present some preliminary thoughts on the phenomenology of the contemplative body.<sup>i</sup> The main part of my presentation will concentrate on the method of how to approach this experience. This description is based on my experience in phenomenology on the one hand and in some eastern practises of the body and mind on the other hand.

By "contemplative body" I mean the experience of the body, which has been opened by certain exercises, which we mainly find in some eastern practices of the body and mind and in some western therapeutic practises, within the so called "somatics" movement.<sup>ii</sup> (E.g. Alexander technique, rolfing, Rosen-method etc.) These methods open the experience of the bodies of the practitioners in a way which is not easily approachable. These practises, which are based on listening to the body from inside, develop the experience of - what I have called - the contemplative body. It means sensitivity to the inner perceptions of the body, movement-awareness, structure-awareness; it means sensitivity to the so called "life force" or "energy of life" that is felt in the body as conscious warmth, vitality and starlike inner vibration. The phenomenology of this kind of trained body is still basically unwritten.

The typical western phenomenology of the body takes as its object the "body of everydayness" - in Heidegger's terms. It is the untrained body, the structures of which it tends to explore. In this way we have begun to understand the perceiving subject, the importance of situation for understanding human engagement with and in the world, and the importance of lived experience. The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a good example of this.<sup>iii</sup> But in the western philosophy the body is not usually seen from the viewpoint of existential practise. This is clearly the area of the philosophy of the body that needs further investigation.

One of the basic deficiency in the western approach to the body and consciousness is, that it does not account the fact, that our experience of the body and the mind and their relationship is not static. Our experience of the relationship of the body and the mind is a dynamic one and depends on our practise. Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa has emphasised especially this difference between western and eastern philosophies. Yuasa writes that the question of the relationship between body and mind can not be approached in an adequate way, if we do not take into account the fact that this relationship is experiential and practise dependent. Actually it is the aim of many eastern philosophical traditions to practise the body and mind so that the experience of separateness of these areas of experience shall fade away and finally there will be the experience of oneness.<sup>iv</sup> And not only the experience of oneness of

the body and the mind but experience of integrity of the whole human being and her world.

Western philosophy usually lacks this view of practise as a means to change the experience. Although just recently in the discussions of cognitive science the role of the contemplative traditions in this respect have been acknowledged.<sup>v</sup>

Also from the philosophy of the body the standpoint of practise is practically missing. But, to my mind, to open up the viewpoint of the "contemplative body" does not necessarily demand the experience of personal practise of the bodily techniques. At least to some extent we can approach these experiences through practising the method of phenomenology only. Although we must be aware, that doing those "phenomenological reductions", that open us the bodily experience, will require lots of patience and practise and certain sensitiveness and ability to listen to the experience.

In order to say something about the phenomenology of the contemplative body, we have to first of all learn to listen to the experience of the body. We have to find the level of our experience that is called "bodyconsciousness". In this paper I am trying to describe the way to do this by passing from ego-consciousness to bodyconsciousness. It is a phenomenological description of a contemplative exercise that is found in many eastern meditation practises. At the same time it is a description of the phenomenological method itself, as it tries to investigate the structures of our consciousness.

Our consciousness is a multileveled experiential complex, where we can distinguish at least the following levels important for the exercise that follows: (1) the awareness of the sensations of the outer senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch), (2) proprioceptive awareness, which means our awareness of the sensations of the inner senses, (3) the associative stream of our consciousness, that means the inner streams of speech, images and so on (4) pure consciousness, where there is the consciousness of itself only.

In order to be able to investigate the bodyconsciousness and its experiential qualities we have to proceed through two phenomenological reductions, operations of "bracketing".<sup>vi</sup>

(1) First we have to put the external world into brackets. We reduce the external world. This means directing the focus of our consciousness, the attention, away from the contents of the outer senses. So we sit down, close our eyes and direct our attention to our inner experience. Because we are trying to reduce the outer world, its better if there are no outer disturbances in the place we are. In this way we become more aware about our inner sensations.

(2) That reduction is easy to do. The second reduction needs more practice. Now we proceed to reduce that level of our consciousness, what we can call "ego-logical" level, where we are aware of our conceptual thinking and inner images and memories. When we look our stream of consciousness close enough, we come to realise that it is in a certain way wild and only weakly under our command. That's

why in this stage we have to proceed through more steps and using some extra device.

(a) The first stage of this second reduction consist of trying to control the association stream of our consciousness so, that we can direct it to one object only. The traditional device in this stage is the breathing, concentration to the breathing and counting the breaths. In practise it means becoming aware of the different stages of breathing and counting breaths from one to ten again and again. If and when we find out that our attention has wandered away of the exercise, we always start to count from the beginning. This is the basic exercise of this reduction and prepares the mind to the next stage, where we can put this ego-logical level totally to the brackets.

(b) When we have advanced in this exercise so that we can do it without trouble, we can proceed to the next practise. In this second stage of this reduction we try to count only the outbreaths and let our consciousness to be empty during the inbreaths. This empty phase during the inbreath is our goal. In this state there is no thought, no image: the ego-logical level of our consciousness has been reduced. To maintain this state for a long time is difficult, that's why we approach it step by step. At this stage of the practise we try to quiet down our consciousness for the duration of inbreath only.

(c) When we have become experienced in this practise so that we can do it without trouble, we can proceed to the third stage, where we drop out totally the action of counting the breaths. We let the consciousness just to listen to the movement of breathing and stay empty of the stream of associations. Establishing this practice requires lots of work but through these stages we have reach a point where we can begin to listen to our body without our attention continually escaping from its task.

(3) There is a third level of the reduction, too. This far we have reduced the empirical ego, but our experience is still supported by the body and its movement of breathing. It is possible to reduce also the movement of breathing and the body, and reach the experience of "the pure consciousness", where the consciousness in a way is just supporting itself. There is just consciousness without contents. But because my task in this paper is to proceed to listening of the bodyconsciousness, we do not take this step.

To recapitulate, we have done two reductions. The first was reducing the external world by turning away from the contents of the external senses. At the second stage we reduced the so called "empirical ego", the ego that thinks, imagines, has memories, does plans, listens to the music and continuously converses with itself about concerns of the daily life. When these reductions are done, it is easier to let the inner senses of the body to come to the focus of the awareness. As a matter of fact, after the previous reductions, and this is important, the bodyconsciousness will automatically come to the centre of our attention, as the ego-consciousness is not filling it anymore. We stay conscious of the movement of the breathing in a natural way, because in a way it is the only activity that is left over after these reductions. Of course it is not easy to stay in this state, because different activities of the ego are

constantly trying to fill our consciousness and try to draw the attention away. But with practise and time the efforts of the ego shall weaken, the penetrating power of the thoughts shall weaken and we will be able to stay more easily in this state of no-thought.

In normal life, in everyday life we are always transcending the body and bodyconsciousness. The ability to listen to the body requires that we break this "natural attitude". Through the reductions described we can move to the phenomenological attitude, and put the inner sensations of the body under our attention. The object we usually transcend, is now put into the centre. What was in periphery, will now be in focus. In this awareness there are no concepts, no memories, no reflection. The bodyconsciousness is non-conceptual, non-reflective, a kind of experience of pure bodily existence. A preliminary phenomenological investigation will reveal a kind of misty inner space with borders unclear, but with a certain kind of centre where the movement of breathing is felt: in the centre of the body. This centre can be felt as a living pulse, as a rhythmically expanding and contracting ball. In this movement we come to feel life in a special and intimate way. We may also hear the beating of our heart, if we stop to listen to it. So in our bodyconsciousness we can come very close to the basic functions of life in us. Especially many eastern traditions call this experience the "life force" or the "energy of life".<sup>vii</sup> The more intensive is our bodyconsciousness, the more intensive way we feel this vital pulsation of the life in our bodies.

In ego-consciousness we are able to transcend that which is given at the moment. That's why we spend most of our time in memories or plans, thinking about theories, having imaginary conversations or listening to the music played in our minds. When we shift our attention to the peripheral area of our consciousness, to the area of bodyconsciousness, we come back to this very moment. In our bodyconsciousness we are always fully present in the moment. This state does not contain thinking, memories or plans. It is returning to this moment. In this respect it is always stopping. It is also stopping in the respect that when we move our attention to our bodyconsciousness, the stream of associations in our ego-consciousness is stopped. When the centre of our attention is in our body, the ego-consciousness is transferred to the periphery. Moved to the periphery it can be either totally mute, or the stream of consciousness can be experienced as if it were behind a wall or its impressions come from very far away. With practise we can move the centre of our attention anywhere in the field of our consciousness, we can pass from its ego-logical<sup>viii</sup> centre to the periphery of the body and in that way investigate the nature of our fluctuating inner experiences.

### *Method 1: the body does not move*

During the first reduction, where we put the external world to the brackets, we sat down, closed our eyes and concentrated to listenig to our inner experiences. In many contemplative traditions, where this kind of reduction is practised, it is done in a

predetermined position of the body. We can find examples of this in Indian yoga, but also in Chinese yi quan, mind boxing, fore example. Actually the position of the body is an essential element of this exercise.<sup>ix</sup> When we reduce the external world, we reduce at the same time the external movement of the body. This means staying in a totally immovable position prescribed by the tradition. Seen from the phenomenological perspective, when the body is immovable, it'll arise to the consciousness in a totally new way. In our normal, everyday behaviour we rarely stay in a completely imovable position. Usually we are constantly moving, and our body, even in staying in one spot, changes the position all the time: is disquiet. But when we practise the stopping of the stream of ego-consciousness, we also stop the stream of the bodily movement. Stopping the movement of the body and staying in one position for a longer time will make us sensitive to many inner experiences. The following two are the most essential in the beginning of this kind of practise.

(1) *Breathing*. In an immovable body the breathing will arise as a kind of paradigm of the movement. Breathing is a movement that we live by as long as we are breathing. It is a movement that is close to us but usually in the natural attitude it is constantly transcended. With practise it is revealed as a very powerful tool for practising the concentration of the mind.

Now, lets go back to the third stage of the second reduction, where we just listen to the movement of the breathing and stay empty of the association stream of the thoughts. This rising up of the movement of breathing happens in the inner space of the body. We do not become aware of any external movement of the objective body<sup>x</sup>, we become aware of something happening in our bodyconsciousness. There are no thoughts in our consciousness but inner sensations of the body. We can feel how the inbreath expands our abdomen to all directions and the outbreath is contracting it. Now, if we concentrate to this conscious breathing, we can discover its many nuances and phases.

The fundamental point is that conscious breathing opens the bodyconsciousness, the inner space of the body in an interesting way. First of all becoming aware of breathing helps us to stop the association stream of our empirical ego and it will show us the level of our consciousness where this stream is born and to where it returns. It also shows us the basic nature of the everyday ego, how it is born and how it disappears.

On the other hand conscious breathing will show us a kind of a centre point of the inner space of the body, which is located in the middle of abdomen where the point of gravity of the body is also situated. This point or area is a very important one in many Asian religious and philosophical traditions<sup>xi</sup>, where the practise of breathing is an essential part of their "technologies of the selves"<sup>xii</sup>. This centre point of the inner space of the body appears to the experience as a centre of the pure, egoless consciousness. In that space pure consciousness without ever rising thoughts will manifest as the same with bodyconsciousness. Then there is the experience of the integration of body and mind, spirituality and corporeality. In this experience there is no separate consciousness and separate body, but these areas of experience will be

united as one, to "spiritually experienced body". The body is experienced as mind; the mind is experienced as body. The inner space of the body is experienced as the space of the pure consciousness. Or maybe it is better to say that the borders of the bodyconsciousness will weaken or become unclear and they blend with the pure consciousness. The centre of this space is experienced as a breathing, pulsing, and living heart or core, which is emanating its life-force to every direction and vitalising every cell of the body. In this way we may become to feel every cell of our body as conscious and full of the vibration of life.

(2) *The integrity of the body*. Another experience rising up from the immobility of the body is connected to the experience, which is called in phenomenology as "doublesensation". We can view our body both from the point of view of the subject or the object. Already Edmund Husserl used the so called "doublesensation" as an example of this.<sup>xiii</sup> When I touch my left hand with my right hand, I can be conscious of the fact that the left hand is the object of my touching. I can feel in my right hand how I touch my left hand with it. But I am also capable of changing the perspective. I can transfer my consciousness, my attention to my left hand and feel the right hand as the object of my touching. Here we come across the so called "chasm", a kind of an intersection of subject and object. From the point of view of the contemplative body this phenomenological description of Husserl and later Merleau-Ponty is not final. As a matter of fact Martin Heidegger refers to the same situation, when he writes in his book "*What is called Thinking*": "Two hands fold into one, a gesture meant to carry man into the great oneness."<sup>xiv</sup> Here we find from Heidegger an interesting reference to folding together of the hands, a gesture which can be found in many religious traditions. Especially in India there is a very rich *mudra* tradition.<sup>xv</sup> Mudra means a kind of symbolic gesture or position of the hands in meditation practise. But mudra should not be seen as a symbolic gesture or position only. It is also a bodily posture that is meant to create a certain bodily experience. Joining together the hands (or legs in *lotus*-position) will help to create a bodily experience of ending of a dualism. In this kind of position the body is not experienced as composed of many different parts. The experience is a kind of inner unity. The immobility of the position intensifies this bodily experience. That's why in actual practise the position is held a long time. To feel one's body as one, as a unity, is a precondition to the experience of the unity of the self and the world. So the experience of unity achieved through a position can deepen to an experience connected to the whole reality.

When the hands touch each other for awhile, it is easy to experience the difference of the subject and the object. But when the hands are kept touching each other for a long time and the same sitting or standing position is kept, the experience will change. We will move to the sphere of the contemplative body. Little by little we will lose the experience of separateness of the hands and finally we can not tell which is the left, which is the right hand. We do not experience a surface, where the right hand is changed to the left hand. Our experience is about the unity of the hands. And if we sit as long time our legs crossed, the separateness of the legs will disappear. The left leg will become the right one and vice versa. Or better said: finally there will be only

the experience of the field of bodyconsciousness, unity with no separate parts. By this example I want to demonstrate, that the phenomenology of the normal or "everyday" body and the phenomenology of the contemplative body can differ in a radical way. The practise of our body and mind will also change our experience of them. One essential feature of this experience can be that the whole difference of body and mind in our experience will disappear.

*Method 2: the body moves*

Above I have described how to approach the experience of the contemplative body by being still, by non-movement. There are of course other ways, too. In movement arts like yoga or taijiquan they strive to achieve "the harmony between movement, breathing and consciousness". What does this description contain? This is another basic method aiming at the control of the association stream of the consciousness through the body. But now the movement of the body is not stopped, it is taken into conscious control. Here we are usually talking about a slow, controlled movement, which is constantly controlled by our attention. Movements of taiji, yoga, qigong, yi quan and others are typical examples of this method. When the focus of the attention is directed to the controlling of the bodily movement, the ego-logical sphere of the consciousness will be left to the periphery. In other words: the mind will quiet down in a natural way. By combining breathing and movement we can still further intensify its conscious control. This additional element will make the situation more complicated and will require still more concentration and listening to the body. Fore example in the movement of taijiquan the outbreath is combined to the stretching, excentric movements of the body, the inbreath is combined to the contracting, concentric movements of the body. In taiji these movements are called "opening" and "closing" movements. In an optimal performance all these three elements move in harmony and support each other. Fore example if I do the opening movement of a taji exercise, where I lift my hands up, the rising movement of the hands and the stretching movement of the whole body is supported by the inbreath, and all this is done by the support of a conscious act of the will. At the same time I listen consciously to the inside of my body and get feedback of my success: if the movement of the hands is supported by the opening movement of the whole body or do they feel separate of this action; how the inbreath manages to support the upward movement of the hands; if I have problems of keeping my attention in listening to the movement etc. This means that I try to do the movement as consciously as possible. Because technically this kind of a whole body movement is very difficult, the inner listening of the movement is most important. By consciously listening to the movement from inside I will become aware of the "openings" or "disconnections" inside the movement, where I have lost the connection of the whole body, the connection of the breathing and movement, the connection of the movement and attention.

The movement of taiji I just described is a paradigmatic example of this practise method. The most essential thing in these movement arts is the inner experience of the practitioner, not so much the external form of the movement. Within the same tradition the external form of the movement may vary, but the inner experience as the central core of the practise shall stay the same. In this kind of practise we control the position and movement of the body, the breathing and the focus of attention. By slowing down the movement to a very quiet and conscious movement of the whole body, from the point of view of phenomenology, we actually do again one kind of reduction. We abandon our natural attitude, where we usually transcend the body because a slow movement requires listening to the body and conscious control of the movement. In the natural attitude we also transcend our movement of the breathing. Breathing usually happens quite automatically and without conscious control. In this method we connect slow movement and breathing to each other, which will cause the breathing to slow down and to begin to support the movement. All this requires careful listening to the body and keeping the focus of our attention at the area of the inner senses of the body. This means that the bodyconsciousness will settle to the centre and the ego-consciousness will be moved to the periphery. And when this happens, when our attention is focused to the bodyconsciousness, our ego-consciousness will be reduced, put to brackets: our consciousness will be empty of conceptual thinking. It is possible that we do not succeed to keep the body continually in the focus of our attention during the movement. We'll notice that at once as weakening of the movement control and movement awareness. In this situation we usually wake up and reduce the empirical ego again to the periphery of our consciousness.

### *Method 3: everyday movement as practise*

If we have done the above exercises for years, the experience of our body and mind begins to change. We begin to move from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude even in daily life. We begin to be more and more conscious of our body all the time instead transcending it. In a way we begin to dwell more in our body. We will become more attentive to our body, its movement and position, our bodyconsciousness turns out to be more and more sensitive. This means that also the sphere of the practise has expanded to all our activities. We can reduce our empirical ego any time we want to by concentrating to the position and movement of the body no matter what it is. We become more sensitive in our ability to listen to the body. In the natural attitude we live more in the sphere of the ego and its various associations and other contents. After long practise with the methods described above we begin to live more in "the contemplative body" and we have achieved maybe a better balance between our ego-consciousness and bodyconsciousness. In this stage, if we want to, we can reduce our empirical ego and listen to the bodyconsciousness, its living vitality and stillness. In this stage we can, if

we want to, try to reduce also the bodyconsciousness and step into the sphere of the pure consciousness.

I have described above some of the methods, that can be called phenomenological, through which we can approach the bodyconsciousness. When we try to move the focus of our attention from the ego-consciousness to the bodyconsciousness, we will meet a certain kind of inner resistance. Because of this resistance, the exercises I just described are not easy. Our consciousness is usually very heavily anchored to its ego-logical centre and giving it up can be almost impossible. It is difficult for us to let go of concepts, chains of thoughts, opinions and return to mere being where the mind is still, empty and waiting. It can be very difficult to break the association streams of the mind. Different kinds of bodily exercises can be a good help in this process in the way I tried to describe in this article. Bodily exercises can help us to move the focus of our attention from the ego-consciousness and open us new possibilities of experience.

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## NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> This article is based on the paper I presented in the IAPS - conference, Oct 23-27, 2002, State College.
- <sup>ii</sup> See, for example: Don Hanlon Johnson: *Bone, Breath, & Gesture. Practises of Embodiment* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995).
- <sup>iii</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1986).
- <sup>iv</sup> "Eastern philosophies generally treat mind-body unity as an achievement, rather than an essential relation." Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body. Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 1.
- <sup>v</sup> See, for example: F. J. Varela, E. Thompson, E. Rosch: *The Embodied Mind* (London: The MIT Press, 1992).
- <sup>vi</sup> I use the terms "bracketing" and "reduction" here in the same phenomenological sense as Natalie Depraz, Francisco J. Varela, ja Pierre Vermersch in their article: *The Gesture of Awareness. An account of its structural dynamics*. Max Velmans (ed.): *Investigatin Phenomenal Consciousness* (Amsterdam: Benjamin Publishers, 1999).
- <sup>vii</sup> As for a detailed discussion of the concept of "life force", see: Yasuo Yuasa: *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
- <sup>viii</sup> This concept comes from David Michael Levin: *The Body's Recollection of Being* (London Routledge, 1985).
- <sup>ix</sup> For the importance of the position of the body, look, for example Katsuo Sekida: *Zen Training - Methods and Philosophy* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1975).
- <sup>x</sup> For the distinction between the objective body and the lived body, see Merleau-Ponty 1986.
- <sup>xi</sup> For the concept of the bodily center and its significance in Japanese culture, see, Karlfried Graf Von Dürkheim: *Hara, the Vital Centre of Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977).
- <sup>xii</sup> This is Foucault's concept, see, Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*. Martin, L.H., Gutman, H., Hutton, P.H. (ed), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Pub, 1988), p. 16-49.

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- <sup>xiii</sup> For the discussion of Husserl's ideas about "double-sensation", see, Dan Zahavi: *Self-Awareness and Alterity. A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1999), p. 107-108.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 16.
- <sup>xv</sup> See, for example, E. Dale Saunders, *Mudra. A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).