Learning to Move from Strength Instead of Strain
by Awakin Call Editors

As a young man he trained for a decade in the classical dance form of bharatanatyam. As an adult he studied yoga, and ran a studio of his own. Until one day he decided to put aside every shred of training he had received and announced he was going to observe his students in silence, and see what arose …it was a radical decision, and for Gert van Leeuwen, it was a moment that changed everything.

Gert van Leeuwen is the founder of Critical Alignment Yoga and Therapy, and the director of two Critical Alignment schools in Amsterdam and Russia. Over the last forty years his work has largely flown under the radar, drawing a small and dedicated following around the world. He has now trained over 200 instructors in this method, and introduced thousands more to its benefits. Founded in the 1980s, Critical Alignment is closely related to the yoga system of B.K.S. Iyengar. It is a precise, slow, and uniquely rigorous practice. The benefits are far-reaching, and at its core is an intriguing principle: Releasing willpower from movement frees body and mind from conditioned preferences and habitual tensions. This enables us to move from relaxation and the flow of higher consciousness. As van Leeuwen puts it, "We can start to move from profound strength instead of strain."

Born in 1954, and raised outside Amsterdam in a family that valued curiosity and independent thought, van Leeuwen was taught early on to resist dogma in all forms. At 18, he witnessed a man floating on the sea in full lotus. The sight left a strong impression, and introduced him to the world of yoga. Later he began a study of bharatanatyam in India, under the tutelage of the legendary C.V. Chandrasekhar. van Leeuwen practiced this mathematically precise, physically demanding, and spiritually infused art form for hours on end, gaining a visceral understanding of how the essence of mythology finds form through embodiment-- ultimately taking the practitioner back to the formless.

In 1982 he opened Bharata, his own dance and yoga studio in Amsterdam. Two years later he was introduced to Norman Sjoman -- an early student of BKS Iyengar, and H.V. Dattatreya. Researchers in the field of physical movement, their approach to yoga was both scientifically rooted, and informed by tradition. Compelled by this blend, van Leeuwen dove into a ten-year intensive study of yoga under their instruction.

Over time his natural instincts led him to resist a passively imitative approach. He was questing for a path that was personal, dynamic, and evolutionary - in alignment with what he saw to be yoga’s true principles. This search prompted him to one day spontaneously instruct his class to practice independently in the studio. Rather than automatically direct their movements, he would observe them in silence, and see what emerged from there. What emerged was the birth of Critical Alignment -- and a multi-decade long study of anatomy, movement principles and psychology that continues to this day.
In his observations, van Leeuwen began to notice that even seasoned yoga practitioners often worked from surface muscles, with a focus on execution. He saw how this focus propagated compensatory movements and built unconscious tension. When students were given manual adjustments to address misalignments, he noticed their bodies were often unable to maintain the corrections on their own. “Teaching people to do a pose is easy,” he says, “but teaching them to break their habits [of tension] while doing the postures is the most difficult part. My quest began there: I wanted to find out, ‘How can I create circumstances in which people will independently break through their tensions?’”

Prioritizing deep questions, and a dedication to building self-reliance in students are hallmarks of van Leeuwen’s method. A self-professed, “Bone Man,” van Leeuwen begins by rooting Critical Alignment firmly in anatomy. While willpower can be used to effect movement in superficial muscles, he points out that it is powerless to restore balance at the skeletal level. In many ways the spine is the backbone of Critical Alignment. Through a process of experimentation, van Leeuwen discovered that, skeletal strength is not activated by willpower but by “the release and transformation of the [conditioned] preferences of your spine.” And this shift only happens he says, by relaxation, and the application of pressure through gravity.

The challenge for many is that stiffness occurs in blind spots— in hard to reach areas that we may have little or no felt awareness of. So van Leeuwen designed a series of props that included rolls for the lower and middle back, a rubber strip for the atlas, and the area between the shoulder blades, a special frame for headstands and one for backbends. The Critical Alignment protocol employs these props in combination with body weight, breath and gravity to help people effect controlled pressure on constricted areas of the spine. Compensatory (and often intense) patterns of tension in the muscles are quietly observed and in their own time, released. Specific movements are introduced to engage deep postural muscles and restore coordination and mobility. Eventually, through this deliberate process, the spine and limbs are able to freely transport movement. Daily activities are imbued with a sense of ease and lightness, and the strengthening that results is earned from the inside out.

Critical Alignment emphasizes the cultivation of all-inclusive attention. As awareness becomes subtler the practitioner objectively observes the physical, psychological and social causes and effects of their tension, as well as their release. With this arise direct experiences of freedom and harmony that are deepened by further relaxation and relinquishment of action-orientation. “This is all we can do—or not do,” says van Leeuwen, “Everything else, feelings of understanding, surrender, and so on, are given to us. We cannot strive for these goals.”

Over a five-year process, and with the catalytic support of Winjand Geraerts-- a dear friend and mentor-- van Leeuwen crystallized the findings, framework and approach of Critical Alignment in book form. In a Facebook post to his community he wrote, “As a teacher I knew I had discovered something but Wijnand carved it out of the rough teacher’s stone inside.” Geraerts participated in the project under the condition that there would be no money involved. He believed this would give them total freedom to “complete the mission.” Over the course of their lengthy conversations van Leeuwen would understand the nature of that freedom, “I felt lighter when I stepped into his room, as if something fell off me. Maybe it was my pride or insecurity, defenses or ego. I tried to fully understand him. And through his deep questioning I understood he tried to do the same.

Yoga Critical Alignment, an illustrated 400-page manual by Shambala Publications was
released in 2013. A weave of anatomy, asana, philosophy, and pedagogy, the book explains the body’s 11 ‘movement chains’ as identified by Critical Alignment and how they are the building blocks of any asana. Subtle alignment details for over 75 traditional yoga postures are included, along with the framework behind van Leeuwen’s teaching methodology and lesson plans.

In 2011, at the invitation of Yoga Journal, van Leeuwen presented the Critical Alignment approach at a conference in Russia. The approach found fertile ground. With support from an influential well-wisher who had experienced the benefits firsthand, a dedicated Critical Alignment studio opened its doors in Moscow in 2019, and today there are over 100 teachers of this method in the country. In addition to Amsterdam and Russia, van Leeuwen currently conducts teacher trainings in Canada and Malaysia. Each summer he holds a 5-day intensive open to novice and experienced practitioners alike, at a countryside retreat in France.

Van Leeuwen’s bone deep approach is compatible across different movement practices. Last year he trained Olympic rowers in Holland. And in his classes, it is common for teachers from widely differing yoga styles to practice side by side. To him, this is the true meaning of the connections he describes. “To connect your own body will make your asanas effortless, but it is a useless practice when we don’t know how to work together without harming others.” In van Leeuwen’s view working with people who wish primarily to take commercial advantage of the benefits of Critical Alignment is one form of violence, and surprisingly-- so is discipline. “I think that discipline has become the cause of maintaining conflict,” he writes, “It confiscates our thinking and action, robbing us of freedom.”

His present day inquiry is on the role Critical Alignment can play in the establishment of right relationship with oneself and the world. He explores this in a work-in-progress book on Critical Alignment Therapy that includes detailed exercises for home practice.

In addition to Yoga Critical Alignment, van Leeuwen is the author of Yoga on the Move (1999) and Stop RSI (2000). When not traveling, he lives with his partner and young son on an island in Amsterdam. He is an avid boater, and spends 20 minutes a day in a headstand.

“There is no discipline in letting go,” says van Leeuwen, “Letting go doesn’t play in time. It is the anti-performance. In order to experience space, I need to understand my confrontations with fear, anger and other negative emotions. This understanding generates silence. Without such understanding the unrest will continue to burn within. This is the complexity of meditation.” And of life.

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