

At the Edge of Our Comfort Zone, is the Possibility of Change by Awakin Call Editors

Gert van Leeuwen is the founder of Critical Alignment Yoga and Therapy-- a precise, slow, and uniquely rigorous practice aimed to free body and mind from conditioned preferences in order to move from higher consciousness rather than willpower. "We can start to move from profound strength instead of strain," says Gert. In these excerpts from an Awakin Call interview last year he shares more about his journey and work.

Early Influences & Explorations in Movement:

I grew up in a Protestant family. We were very sober. Movement was not very familiar to us. My first yoga teacher came from Surinam, from an Indian family. It was flower power time, when everyone was attracted to India. I had started to read Krishnamurti, and a friend asked me to come to yoga class with this teacher, who approached yoga from his [South Indian] dance background."

Gert first trained in yoga, and then later in the Classical Indian dance form of bharatanatyam

I fell in love immediately [with South Indian dance] because it was technically very strong. I felt attracted to the story-telling part. It wasn't like free-style dancing; no, it was almost mathematical learning, and step by step I learned to dance. ... I was able to express, through my body and through movement because the technical part and the lyrical part came together. We tell stories by the use of body language, the use of gestures, mudras, and facial expression. And that combination really struck me. ... My whole life is a coincidence, but that was my missing link in yoga, because yoga didn't deal with expression.

Maybe intuitively I started to explore feelings and expression through the body - which came together in the stress-related response in the body. We need our body to express safety not only to ourselves, but also to our environment and to our next generation. I need to clear my own stress responses in order to give freedom to the education of my child.

On Releasing tension through relaxation rather than willpower/discipline

We make a mistake in how to approach the release of tension through the body. The way to develop health traditionally is through discipline. ... Military discipline means that soldiers need to follow orders (this sense of the word found its way through sport). Many times, body work followed this conflict, unfortunately. How can you discipline the tensions in your body, when release of tension can only come through relaxation - surrendering to gravity?

How can you discipline your body and create a trusting relationship with it? We need to learn from our body. Relaxation is a tricky word, because people think about being inactive. Nature gave us two strength systems in our body: one is willpower, the other is related to the skeletal muscles. [The second system] only becomes active when we release our tensions and when there is a proper passage of movement When every vertebra is mobile through the pressure of our body, we activate reflexes which cannot be activated by willpower and we have access to a strength system which is the supplier of energy. Willpower makes us tired, and gives us a negative relation to energy. ... When we got access to the deeper layers of muscles, we get more energy. ... Skeletal strength brings the union in our body. We can experience our body as a whole. From a physical perspective, we need those muscles to become whole again. It's about the order -- then we can start to interact with willpower. But willpower should not suppress the wholeness in our body.

On Beginning the journey One Small Step at a Time:

You can start your journey by isolating certain tensions in your body in order to open up again. The relation with our body is so difficult - when we're at work, we forget it; and when we do our sports, we punish it.

What we need to do, is something I call, "moving from B to A."

B is the way we've developed as adults with our tensions and traumas and stress-related memories, and A is the body we had when we entered the planet and it's based on trust. The movement toward trust, from B to A, is maybe a long journey, but the good news is - it's really about stepping into that movement. So even a small step will be a full, 100% change in your awareness. It's not about the result of movement, it's about the movement itself. If you make a small step in that direction, you will begin to benefit from it. So please, start to explore. It's so simple. To step into that motion is not a big step. It's a joyful exploration.

On the Relationship Between Structural Stress & Unmet Needs:

The feeling of love is a need, and a need is a feeling which can be experienced through the body. So suppose that your body is a bucket, and the fulfillment of needs happens by pouring the feeling into the bucket - for instance, love. When it's only half full, something else takes over, and the feeling of love cannot reach its full development when anger and fear, for example, take over. The body simultaneously builds up a physical strain which is part of the negative emotion, and this strain blocks the experience of love more and more.

Problem with stress is that we judge our actual circumstances by comparison. We have images from the past, and we look at our actual situation, and our brain (subconscious) make rough comparisons with the old images and then it starts to detect stress and the physical body will change, and our emotional life will change - everything will change. But the problem is that the brain makes mistakes. When we were young, we were vulnerable. But at this moment, we are not vulnerable anymore. That is a big difference, but stress is making this comparison all the time, even if the situation we are in is not really the same as when we experienced our traumas in the past.

So the brain still detects lack of safety in certain situations. The question of course is, is it true that we are really unsafe, or does it come from our interpretation of the situation we are in? And how do we deal with that? Is [for instance] anger still the right answer to

feeling unsafe, or is it possible to give another answer to the circumstances we're in?

Opening to the Space of Our Bodies

When we change the patterns in our body – when, for instance, anger takes over, it has a certain posture, and people develop in that posture and become strained (chest falls in, shoulders move up, neck becomes tense, maybe lower back becomes tense).

When we change the body-- when I ask people to experience the space in their chest, for example – they are afraid to move into it, because something in their subconscious brain tells them 'Don't go there, because it's not safe.' I try to help my students see that's not true. When you open up to space – when you try to fill the buckets of your suppressed needs, it will become your strength.

To do this, we need to isolate certain areas in our body which have the relation to the suppression of needs. When I began to practice yoga, the normal asana system wasn't able to reach those areas. The root of stress, and the root of our tensions, is related to the heart regions, where we experience fear. We withdraw from our environment because of fear – it makes our upper back curved. When it becomes curved, there will be a whole pattern of changes in our musculature system. In the end, we're not able to move in area between shoulder blades anymore. We cannot reach that area through our own coordination anymore, because we need the head, and neck to bring back movement between shoulder blades, in order to open up chest area again. No one can do that through their own coordination. Through asana alone, it's almost impossible to change that pattern. So I developed special props to isolate the areas (belly, upper back) in order to create free movement in chest again.

When we isolate our tension and step into the explored feeling of space, for example, or energy, then at some point, we reach the edge of our comfort zone, and at the edge of our comfort zone, we have the possibility to change.

But what is the cause that people are so afraid to step into the feeling and experience and space – it's not just the sensation in the body, the spine, which causes the fear, but something inside us tells us 'don't go there.' Because then you get vulnerable again. But it's not true. My task is to explore with people that they don't need to be afraid anymore, they can open up and step into space even when they reach the edge of their comfort zone.

The experience of trust is experienced in the whole body, and the feeling of stress is experienced in a part of the body. In that process of change, the whole body starts to open up – it starts to circulate and expresses itself as a whole. When we make a decision to step into the wholeness of the body, then the conflict will dissolve in the experience of the wholeness. That's an analogy of the world – if you see the wholeness of the world, the local conflict will dissolve in it.

On inspiration, creativity, and silence

Inspiration is a beautiful thing, but it's also very scary – you don't know where it goes to. It's unplanned. It may sound strange, but when I was young, I already knew that I would become maybe well known in the field of yoga. You know something about yourself, and when you don't judge and don't repeat the old story of the tradition – and then come through silence – you become creative. When creativity comes from this place of wholeness in relation to your own body, in relation to thought, then something magical

starts to happen. I'm so often amazed in the things I think, and I also don't have the sense that I invented them. They just came, through questioning. And when you ask the right question, the answer is also included in that. I'm very grateful that I had the possibility to develop like this. I don't relate it to myself. There's something in that silence, in the feeling of unity - when you attach to that, some new order comes out. I witnessed that in my own development. That's one of the mysteries, in life, I think. Where does it all come from when it's not planned, and when it's something new? That's trust - to trust to silence, to trust in the wholeness. It gave me so much that there's no way back for me anymore.

On trusting in the flow and gifts of life

I'm not a commercial teacher. I've developed my work from that moment of inspiration. People come along on your path and they recognize something in you in which they want to share. It's such an organic development. ... I don't know how it happens, but something in that subconscious -- when there's no fear, when there's no distrust, people recognize it and start to communicate from a subconscious level in trust to each other. It brings that energy together in a very beautiful and modest way. How it works, I can only share my own experience and how I observed how it happened: It's very touching, it's very beautiful, and it's very delicate.

Enlightenment is a movement in the here and now

I don't believe in enlightenment, but I do believe in lightness. I do believe in energy. I do believe in space. I come back to that word discipline. Disciplining means that you travel for a long time and in the end there's a goal. I don't want to travel. I don't want to wait to reach the goal. I want to experience the goal immediately, in the here and now. That person with that strong kyphosis [back condition], when he lay down on that strip [Critical Alignment yoga prop], that was his moment of enlightenment. Then he can move into another step and another layer in the release of his tensions, and another moment of insight will come. Enlightenment to me is a movement in the here and now, not a goal to be reached.

For more inspiration join a special 'Intro to Critical Alignment' session later this month. More details and RSVP info [here](#).