Deep Bodywork and the Dance of Awareness

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Abstract: Dance of Awareness is an approach to working with movement, dance and awareness which is grounded in body psychotherapy, developmental psychology and the bioenergetic wave, and draws on the movement disciplines of Five Rhythms and Authentic Movement. Parallels between the neo-Reichian character structures and the five rhythms are suggested, and the role of a moving body in exploring consciousness is examined.

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Introduction

I have been working over recent years to develop an understanding of links between somatic psychotherapy, movement and awareness. I have been practising as a deep bodyworker, or body psychotherapist, seeing individual clients, and also facilitating regular groups and workshops. The groupwork has coalesced into an approach I have called Dance of Awareness. This approach has four key streams of influence:

- Reichian body-centred psychotherapy, and specifically Deep Bodywork and Postural / Somatic Integration as taught by Silke Ziehl and Jack Painter.
- Expressive movement and ecstatic dance, in particular the 5 Rhythms dance practice developed by Gabrielle Roth.
- The practice of Authentic Movement developed by Mary Starks Whitehouse and Janet Adler, and Linda Hartley, among others.
- Non-dual awareness – a concept found in most mystical traditions but most clearly expressed, for me, in the Advaita Vedanta tradition. Most recently I have been influenced on this subject by discussions with the writer Nathan Gill and the Feldenkrais therapist Roger Linden.

The influence of Reich is acknowledged in the field of Dance Movement Therapy, but I have not been able to find research specifically linking therapeutic dancedwork to the Reichian character structures. There is some research on the progressive changes in reflex movement patterns through early development, and how these can be worked with in Developmental Movement Therapy. There is also research into the characteristic body flows and tensions associated with psychoanalytic structures (neonatal, oral, anal, urethral), using Laban movement analysis.

In this paper I suggest ways in which the Reichian structures can be evoked and explored in a dance setting, and also suggest a close parallel between the character structures and Roth’s 5 Rhythms map. This approach is set in the context of allowing
material to emerge into consciousness, through awareness practice and Authentic Movement.

Reich’s concept of character structure is built on Freud’s hypotheses of the formative developmental stages of early childhood (oral, anal, phallic, etc) and has in turn been elaborated by neo-Reichian therapists such as Lowen13, and Ziehl14 – whose model I follow. The character types have been variously defined, but for this paper I follow Ziehl in calling them Fragmented, Oral, Psychopath, Masochist and Rigid. Over recent years I believe there has been increasing convergence in understanding the links between childhood development (eg Stern15), neuropsychology (eg Schore16), psychoanalytic character styles (eg Johnson17), and the body-centred wisdom of the neo-Reichians (eg Totton18) and somatic psychologists (eg Hartley19).

Working with the energetic wave

For many years I was an enthusiastic follower of the 5 Rhythms dance practice developed by Gabrielle Roth, attending regular classes, workshops and peer group sessions. The work allows free expressive movements through a ‘wave’ of dance rhythms – Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and Stillness. The rhythms have been described as follows:

“Flowing – the fluid, continuous, grounded glide of our own movements
Staccato – the percussive, pulsing beat that shapes us a thousand different ways
Chaos – the rhythm of letting go, releasing into the catalytic wildness of our dance that can never be planned or repeated
Lyrical – the rhythm of trance, where the weight of self-consciousness dissolves, we lighten up and relax into our own unique movement
Stillness – the rhythm of emptiness, where gentle movements rise and fall, start and end, in a field of silence”.20

When I started to train in Deep Bodywork and Postural Integration with Silke Ziehl, I was drawn to parallels between the five rhythms (‘5R’) and the Reichian character structures. There is not a straight correlation between the 5R and the five Reichian character types, but I see an interesting parallel, which begins with breath.

The bioenergetic breath cycle, Stages in Natural Energy Flow elaborated by Jack Painter21, also looks very much like a wave, starting from a state of low excitation, charging and discharging to a point of release and plateau excitement, followed by a relaxation and return to stillpoint. The first five phases of breath are related directly to Reichian character typology:

<table>
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<th>Painter’s breath phase</th>
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<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
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<td>Exciting</td>
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</table>
These are followed by a discharging breath cycle of Orgastic, Ecstatic, Surrendering and Relaxing breath.

A typical 5R session would start with a guided ‘body-parts warmup’, working through the body, systematically loosening muscles and joints. In many ways, this addresses the Fragmented character type and the Secure Breath state – arriving into the body and giving awareness to its physicality and connectedness.

The first Rhythm is Flowing – emphasising groundedness, yin energy, and a focus on inbreath. I see a link to the Oral type, and to the Nurturing Breath stage with a need to be nurtured, and take in breath.

The second Rhythm is Staccato – expressive, yang energy emphasising outbreath, with a link to the inflated Psychopath structure and Exploring Breath phase.

The third rhythm, Chaos, emphasises release, and mirrors the Masochistic structure and Free Breath state.

The fourth Rhythm is Lyrical. Depending on the depth of release in Chaos, Lyrical can be light and celebratory, but also has the potential to stay at a trance-like plateau, and be the space for connecting both inwards with deep emotions, and outwards to other dancers. This links to the Rigid structure, with joyful expression and Exciting Breath.

Finally the fifth rhythm is Stillness, mirroring the Surrendering and Relaxing Breath, discharge and integration.

As an aside, 5R teachers refer to the cycle of rhythms as “The Wave” and regard it as characteristic of 5R teaching. There is resistance within 5R community to the use of the term ‘wave’ elsewhere\(^\text{2}\). My own feeling is that the energetic wave is ubiquitous, as basic as the charging and discharging phases of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. 5R has captured its relationship to dance very effectively, but does not hold the monopoly on its creative and therapeutic use. The bioenergetic breath wave is one example, and there is an interesting parallel with the Gestalt cycle of experience (sensation, figure formation, mobilisation, action, contact, withdrawal), which is often represented as a wave, for instance by Gestalt body psychotherapist James Kepner\(^\text{23}\). Detailed exploration of this parallel is beyond the scope of this paper, but is included in the summary table for interest.

**Linking 5R to Reichian Structures and Breath**

In my Dance of Awareness group work I combine my experience of 5R with the energetic breath wave, Reichian character structure, and a strong focus on inner awareness. Participants are regularly reminded of the trinity of breath, body, and awareness.

The DoA cycle is similar in structure to the 5R wave, but has been adapted to take account of Reichian developmental psychology. The cycle allows the embodiment and expression of the bioenergetic character structures in their developmental
sequence. This gives the mover a chance to re-experience the formative years of early development, release old wounds, and discover new patterns of moving and relating.

On arrival at a Dance of Awareness session, movers join an initial warm-up. The mover is invited to arrive in the space and to be sensed directly. From a gentle introduction, the music becomes more energising as movers are encouraged to become aware of their breath, their body, the space, and others in the space. There may be an invitation to acknowledge other movers, to loosen, explore, move, shake.

At the ‘top’ of the introductory energising phase, movers are asked to stop, turn their attention inwards and note what is present in awareness for them. This is an invitation to come to a stillpoint of awareness – being aware of awareness itself - and see what is present, here and now.

The group makes a circle to welcome participants, and to brief them on the structure of the session. Depending on the nature of the event there may be opportunity for participants to introduce themselves, share, etc.

At this point Dance of Awareness begins its progress through a energetic cycle. I have termed the six phases in the cycle sensing, grounding, expressing, releasing, connecting, and completing.

**Sensing.** Sensing is undertaken in silence, or to quiet, meditative music. It involves a guided body and breath awareness process, focusing on direct sensation of muscles, bones, skin. There is also an invitation to recognise and follow any impulses as they emerge. Individual body parts (e.g., hands) or structures (e.g., bones) may be identified and encouraged to move, whilst noticing the impact of the rest of the body as it follows in connection. Awareness takes on an inner focus and the suggestion is to take ‘just enough’ breath.

From a bioenergetic (Ziehl / Painter) perspective, this phase addresses the Fragmented structure. This structure represents the earliest phase of development, around birth and very early attachment; there may be a sense of the body being experienced at an undifferentiated, almost cellular level. The invitation is to come physically into the body, to sense the tissues and allow impulses to be recognised, and to start to move in response to impulses. I am arriving in my body, in the space, in the group and experiencing a sense of presence and safety. The breath is at the Secure (“just enough”) stage. In 5R the initial ‘body parts warmup’ fulfils a similar function.

**Grounding.** Grounding addresses the Oral structure, where attachment and bonding are important. Emphasis is given to allowing weight, and receiving support, through connection with the floor. It can include horizontal grounding (lying, crawling, rolling), as well as vertical grounding – standing, bringing attention to feet, legs, and pelvis. Support may be provided by partners, for instance in pair work where one partner witnesses the other moving possibly with eyes closed to encourage inner attention. Or the partner may provide physical support, perhaps by holding a particular part of the mover’s body and following it, helping them to move more easily or fully. As the lower body becomes securely established, the upper body is encouraged to take on the movement, including the structures associated with oral holding (arms, jaw). The music has a seamless, fluid character.
Emphasis is given to the Nurturing breath, charging, taking in what is needed with the inbreath - although orality may initially be evoked by encouraging a sighing outbreath. Awareness moves between inner and outer focus, and movers may be encouraged consciously to move attention between inner and outer realms. The Grounding phase is similar in feel to the first of the five Rhythms, Flowing.

Expressing. Having established support and taken in what is needed, energy shifts into expressing, making shapes, significant movements, embodying ‘how I am right now’. Movers adopt an outward focus, exploring the physical space, taking steps, showing themselves. They are encouraged to notice their own patterns – including beliefs and feelings that may be expressed physically - and to experiment with other patterns, chosen from personal reflection or mirrored from other movers. A conscious use of space, and interaction with other movers, encourages clarity around boundaries. The music tends to have an assertive, defined beat. Staccato is the second of the five Rhythms, which this phase most resembles.

The Psychopath structure is invoked through discharging - assertive use of arms, elbows, shoulder girdle, and encouraging the Exploring outbreath, including the expressive use of sound. This developmental stage is associated with the toddler adventuring out, with the assurance of return to support and safety, and a developing sense of self. Movers are encouraged to explore self-expression whilst receiving support – physically or through supportive witnessing. They are also invited to explore new shapes or movements and share these with other movers.

As movers become clearer and more confident in their expression, the next Reichian structure begins to surface – the Masochist. In this developmental structure, issues of will and authority emerge and movers often exhibit inflated ‘squaring up’ behaviour, particularly in pair work. This increases the group energetic charge and leads into the opportunity for physical release.

Releasing. As expression becomes fully developed, movers are brought briefly back to stillness and to invitation to return to awareness. They are invited to tune in and notice parts of the body ‘ready to move’. Energising music is used to encourage the softening and loosening of any holding or tension, using movement and sound. Movers may release on their own, with partners, in small groups (taking it in turns to be the focus), or in a larger held circle where one or more may enter and enjoy the energetic permission to release. We may also work with physical loosening, partners massaging particular parts of the body where holding may be noticed. We may offer the opportunity to enjoy a stylised tantrum or work with saying “No!” The key issue is freedom – to be myself, to move as I want to.

Having evoked the Masochistic through expression, the structure is addressed through the release of compressed energy, transforming into easy movement, and Free breath. The Releasing phase can be dramatic, noisy and cathartic, although the body may also release in gentle, easy action. The mover may enter a trance-like state where the body loosens and releases without conscious effort. Chaos is the equivalent stage of the five rhythms.
**Connecting.** Typically, the freedom associated with release creates a sense of openness and space for connection. Initially the phase may continue the trance-like transcendent quality of releasing, and may continue on an effortless plateau for some time, but gradually the invitation is to return to embodiment and open to easy connection with self and others. Simple forms of contact (eye, fingertip) may deepen into an exploration of touch and physical connection.

From the Reichian perspective, the Rigid structure is evoked. This addresses the phase of early sexual awareness, opening the heart and connecting to the pelvis. The Rigid structure is complex, with four sub-structures based on a boy or girl identifying most closely with mother or father. The common theme is to be ‘accepted for who I am’ in my totality. The associated bioenergetic breath phase is described as Exciting, and is seen as a recapitulation of the earlier four structures, before moving on to a discharging Orgastic breath, and plateau of Ecstatic breath. In 5R terms we are in the Lyrical stage.

With the theme of connection comes a general ease of moving with others in a celebratory or exploratory way. Often little structure is necessary, other than the permission to make contact and move in ways that feel right, following impulses. As the phase deepens, however, awareness around the issue of connection may include questions of what kind of connection I want, or do not want. Connections to inner worlds, new resources, other places and people may arise. Physical contact may become gentler, slower, mesmeric. Movers seem able to support each other, or to move in ways that support themselves. The cycle is moving towards completion.

**Completing.** As the cycle turns, the mover experiences a sense of individuation into their own dance. There may be a body-held sense of something which remains unresolved, and there is an invitation to allow any movements, gestures, shapes or sounds which may be needed to give a sense of completion. Having evoked and explored the developmental structures in sequence, we allow an integration of the cycle, coming to a final resting place which feels appropriate, for now.

Movers may be in contact, or by themselves. They are returning to awareness of breath, body and awareness itself. The breath is Surrendering and Relaxing, the associated 5R stage is Stillness.

Following the completion of this cycle, there is generally a sharing circle to allow participants to speak of their experience, insights and feelings about the process. As the body becomes a vehicle for unconscious material it can be helpful to bring in the mind to observe and analyse – how did I experience grounding, what was it I was expressing or releasing, how did I respond to the possibility of connection?

The degree to which I encourage post-process analysis varies for different groups. To some extent, it may be enough for the body to go through a releasing cycle based on early development. Gabrielle Roth is often quoted as saying “*Put the body in motion and the psyche will heal itself*”. As the Reichian structures are evoked, expressed and allowed to move in their developmental sequence, the body may experience a release of old patterns, an increase in movement repertoire, and a repatterning of breath and posture which make form growth and healing. However for true bodymind
integration, I believe that these must be linked to the beliefs, attitudes and fears which are carried in the body.

It has been noted that simply repeating patterns or going through catharsis without bringing awareness to the process is unlikely to be helpful. From the dance movement therapy perspective, Kristina Stanton-Jones\textsuperscript{24} notes: “Catharsis on its own is not enough; the release of intense emotions is liberating, but must be accompanied by ownership and understanding of the emotions released. It is of the utmost importance that the dance movement therapist does not allow the movement experience to be one of mindless release, and that he or she ensures that the physical release does not become an end in itself, but rather is understood in the context of the relationships developed in the group...”.

The second part of this paper addresses the background of awareness skills which can help the mind to make sense of the moving body.

**Awareness into Dance**

The Dance of Awareness cycle described above is supported by music which is chosen to evoke particular energies at different phases of the cycle. The mover’s internal state is influenced by external factors - the music, the space, other movers, suggestions or guidance from the group facilitator. Equally, the mover’s internal state may find external expression in movement. The dance therapist Joan Chodorow\textsuperscript{25} distinguishes between impression (movement affecting internal states) and expression (internal states affecting movement). It can be helpful to become aware of the interplay between these influences.

As the cycle progresses, I will often stop music and invite dancers to return to awareness and notice what is there in the present moment. This can encourage a remembering of the body in relation to sensation and grounding, and help them to notice particular patterns of holding, or a sense of what may be just below the surface of consciousness, ready to be embodied and released. In Dance of Awareness workshops, I have developed a sequence which takes movers more systematically through this process:

**Go into awareness** – in other words, becoming aware of awareness itself as the screen on which thoughts, sensations, images, appear.

**What do you notice?** There is always something appearing in awareness – an image in the visual field (from the external environment, or generated internally by the mind); a thought; a physical sensation; a sound or smell (again, from an external or internal source).

**Look for a body response** – as the material appears in awareness, notice what happens in the body. There may be a sense of a particular shape being held, a field of energy in a specific part of the body, or attention being drawn to a certain area or structure.
Sense it – as the body reacts to material in awareness, the reaction is sensed directly on the kinaesthetic level.

Breathe into it and let it move – using the breath to focus attention into the area or structure in question, and allowing any impulsive movement to be initiated. Spontaneous release of sound may also happen, and is encouraged.

Follow the movement to completion. As the movement develops, it is allowed to progress in any way that feels ‘right’, without censoring or judging. Generally, the movement sequence will come to a point at which it feels complete – it may be short and sudden, or may go through a number of phases involving other parts of the body, before a sense of completion is discovered.

At the point of completion, the mover returns to awareness and the sequence can start again.

There are similarities here with the Gestalt cycle of experience, and with the Focusing technique of Eugene Gendlin, working with the ‘felt sense’ using body awareness to bring unconscious material into consciousness. There are also links to work with trauma (Levine, Ogden & Minton, Rothschild) where somatised traumas are processed by tracking physical sensation and allowing the completion of ‘frozen’ reflexes or arrested movements.

Authentic Movement

Giving expression to internally sensed impulses, images, feelings and thoughts can be a powerful experience for participants. Movements which are allowed to develop from apparently random impulses can become symbolic, significant and satisfying. One approach I have found helpful in clarifying this process is Authentic Movement (AM). AM has its roots in Jungian psychology, meditation and dance movement therapy. Developed in the US by Mary Whitehouse, Joan Chodorow, and Janet Adler among others, the discipline has a growing body of teachers and practitioners. I have trained with the movement therapist and somatic psychologist Linda Hartley.

AM is based on the relationship between a mover and a witness. In a typical ‘move’, a mover starts with eyes closed and attention directed inward. As inner impulses and spontaneous movements arise, these are followed. The witness watches and tracks their inner response to the mover. Afterwards, the mover reports the sensations, feelings, thoughts, images and movement impulses which came into consciousness during the move. The witness may offer feedback of their own impressions of the move. Alternatively, mover and witness may write, paint or draw about whatever emerges, as a way of fixing the new material in consciousness.

AM can take place between two people (a ‘dyad’) or in larger groups. It has some simple rituals which provide a container for the exploration of deep material. A number of forms or structures for exploring the process have developed. From my own experience, it can be used:

- as a meditative practice that deepens awareness;
- as a psychotherapy process, bringing unconscious material into consciousness;
- as an aid to creativity, developing new ideas and resources;
- as a group process, creating connection and community.

An AM ‘move’ takes place without music, and within an agreed timescale. The mover surrenders to the flow of material which arises in consciousness, and allows spontaneous movement to develop. The act of witnessing is of equal importance. By paying attention to the sensations, feelings, memories and images which emerge whilst observing the mover, the witness comes to notice their own projections and interpretations.

AM is relatively self-regulating; mover and witness support each other, learn from each other and grow together. The relationship is generally peer-to-peer rather than therapist-to-client. However AM has a history of use in Jungian analysis, where it is seen as an aspect of active imagination alongside dreamwork, free association, work with art materials, etc.

Janet Adler compares the psychoanalytical process with the developing mover-witness relationship and notes five stages through which AM moves. Firstly, there is a sense of recognition of the ability to move without ego interference. In my experience with movers, this can be most difficult for those with a history of working with consciously directed movement (dance, yoga, tai chi, etc), where the question ‘how do I know it’s authentic?’ often arises. Second, there comes a willingness to explore and enjoy the freedom to move in this way. Third, comes the recognition of an “emerging repertoire” of movement patterns. In my own practice I have come to recognise, and name, a number of my own idiosyncratic patterns and gestures. As they emerge into consciousness, they become available for investigation. This is the fourth stage – focusing. As the body expresses, I may amplify and develop these movements. Sometimes I have the sense of arrested impulses being allowed to complete, as in trauma work. Meanwhile the mind is curious – what is this about, what is the movement saying? Feedback from a witness can help to clarify this. In AM, the emphasis is on developing my own internal witness, noting my movements, as a doorway to a more inclusive sense of self. Unacknowledged aspects of my psyche are taking a non-verbal route into consciousness. Adler’s final stage is thus one of resolution, integration, a sense of coming through a process with renewed energy and fresh understanding.

This approach informs the way I work with individual clients in body psychotherapy. I now use AM as a therapeutic process tool alongside bodywork, gestalt and focussed awareness. For example, I offer a client the opportunity to focus inwards for a period of 10 minutes (marked by the sounding of a gong) during which they simply follow movement impulses. At the end of the move, impressions and insights are discussed. A surprising amount of material may surface from such an invitation. I also offer the opportunity to work exclusively with AM, one-to-one, or in groups.

Who (or what) is witnessing?

One of my interests is in the dance between ‘pure’ awareness and the apparent contents of awareness. The Authentic Movement model traces the same trajectory as Ken Wilber’s developmental arc, from pre-egoic through egoic, to trans-egoic.
“Who is the Witness?” is the title of one of Janet Adler’s papers. She traces the relationship of the mover and witness from merged, pre-egoic empathic connection, through a dialogic egoic compassionate phase, to a unitive trans-egoic state where mover and witness are separate yet resonating. Alongside the external witness the mover is empowered to discover and develop an internal witness which brings deeper awareness to one’s own process. In my experience, the practice encourages a gradual widening of focus from individual process into group process, and a deepening experience of collective consciousness.

I generally start my movement groups with attention to awareness itself – the sense of presence, energy, ‘on-ness’, or non-duality, which is described in many ways in mystical traditions and is ultimately indescribable. This unchanging aspect of consciousness is also a curiosity for modern neuroscientists such as Damasio where the ‘big problem’ of consciousness research is this question: if everything we notice takes place in awareness, what is awareness itself? Writers on non-duality can use the words ‘awareness’ and consciousness in different ways, but the point is the same. Nathan Gill says that ultimately, all there is, is consciousness. Gill distinguishes two aspects of consciousness – awareness, and the contents of awareness, which appear simultaneously in consciousness. According to this view, although awareness appears to be mediated through the body, body sensations, thoughts and emotions are all part of the contents of awareness. So too is the ‘psychological self-sense’ of ego. Awareness itself remains untouched – and may be realised as the trans-egoic “I” or Big Self.

The paradox for me, as a practising body psychotherapist is that, seen from the viewpoint of awareness, the ego and its neuroses are simply appearances in awareness. Rather than encouraging a client to deepen their identification with their ‘story’ it may be preferable to create distance and dis-identify with it. But the process of dis-identification may also lead to denial of what is actually appearing in awareness, including body-mediated sensations, emotions and impulses. I recognise this as an element in my own preferences for heady analysis rather than embodied experience.

My approach is thus to start with awareness of awareness itself, and to attend to what appears in awareness - very much the phenomenological Gestalt model. Whatever appears may be given form through the body. The body is a vehicle for the formless, out-of-consciousness, to become consciousness, to take shape, and to move. When the move is complete, there is a return to the ground of awareness itself.

We are in spiritual territory here, and for me the healing power of the work is itself a dance – between identification (the exploration of ‘my’ character, story and personal issues) and dis-identification (witnessing ‘me’ from a distance, sensing ‘I’ am part of something transpersonal, experiencing the place of pure awareness). All of this takes place within awareness, and my moving body is the form in which consciousness grows and explores itself.

Summary

I have drawn on my experience and understanding of Reichian psychotherapy, developmental psychology, bioenergetics and 5 Rhythms dance to draw links between
phases in the energetic cycle, stages in the developmental process and the five rhythms. These are synthesised into an approach I have called Dance of Awareness, which I hope will be of interest to bodyworkers, movement therapists, and others. I have also noted a possible link to the Gestalt cycle of experience. These may be summarised in the table below. I have also reviewed ways in which material arising in dance and movement work can be understood and integrated into the bodymind in the context of awareness.

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Endnotes

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