

Integrating Sensory Awareness And Somatic Psychotherapy

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Abstract

The author depicts how, after returning from serious study in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan, she entered the work of Sensory Awareness which she felt was a western version of Zen practice. After studying Reichian therapy the author connects the lineage and intention between these seemingly disparate practices. During years of practice the two fields are integrated in highly successful and satisfying experiences. Case studies are presented and the philosophy and method of teaching this “Sensory-Awareness-based somatic psychotherapy” in graduate schools.

Keywords

Sensory Awareness – Somatic Psychotherapy – Reichian Therapy – Integrating Practices
Case Histories – Somatic Reclaiming - Teaching

Meeting Sensory Awareness

I was a dancer in my early days. In 1959 in New York City, I saw a class for “Nonverbal Communication” in the catalogue of the New School for Social Research, and I thought, “That’s for me!” But the course schedule interfered with one of my dance classes, so that was that. Several years later, after having lived in Asia for three years, half of that time dancing and half the time studying in a Zen Buddhist Monastery, I saw again the names of the people who had offered that class: Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks. This time the name of their course was “Sensory Awareness,” and this time it fit into my schedule and into my needs. After a life of movement and then the stillness I had desired and found in the Zen monastery, upon my return from Asia I was looking for ways to integrate those seemingly opposite modes of living. How to combine and live the stillness in movement and be able to share with people the movement in stillness? I had begun to study t’ai chi ch’uan, and here in Sensory Awareness was a more pervasive, wholistic manner of living.

The work in the classes was very much like living in the monastery: Pay attention. Be conscious of what you are doing. Be present. Don’t let your mind get carried away. I was thrilled and intrigued. I took as many classes as I could. In order to study with Charlotte and Charles, in the years since 1968 I have followed them to Esalen (in Big Sur, California), Mexico, New York City, and Monhegan Island, Maine. I remember telling my Zen Master that I had found the American version of Zen. I could appreciate this simple practice of being more present in everything I did in my life.

Introduction to Reichian Therapy

When my marriage ended and I was left with a toddler and an infant, I felt the need for supportive therapy and found a therapist to work somatically with me. (I had never had success with talk therapists, and being a dancer I felt there had to be some way to integrate the body/mind.) I eventually heard of Wilhelm Reich and was so intrigued by his work that I began to study in this field. When Charles Brooks learned I was studying Reich, he was very pleased. Charles very much respected Reich and his work. I could see how the two ways of working were connected. I became certified in Reichian therapy in 1976 and was told by my mentor to begin offering therapy sessions. I earned my doctorate in Reichian psychology in 1979.

In Sensory Awareness, there is nothing to teach. It is just the activity of experiencing and working to be ever more present for the moment. As my ability to be more present deepened, like in Zen, the SA became more in me and I became more it. Of course, as I became ever more present in the moment for myself, I became more present in the moment for my clients. My working with them changed: a lot of what I had been taught got dropped by the wayside. Not the knowledge, but the techniques. If I am going to be fully present and responsive to the moment and able to help another be more in the moment, it doesn’t make sense to use a technique that I was taught some time ago. Sensory Awareness taught me the essence of being fresh and responding to what is happening at each moment...just what I learned in Zen.

Integrating Sensory Awareness and Reichian Therapy

Almost without my knowing it, in my quest to be as real and honest as possible, I integrated what I received from Sensory Awareness into my clinical work. Eventually I found myself no longer calling it “Reichian Therapy.” In my effort to be accurate, the name had evolved to “Reichian-based Awareness Therapy.” Even though the name was unwieldy, I felt my work was good. In fact, it seemed to some that my work was a combination of meditation -- actually the sensory awareness work-- and energetic release. (In 1982, I gave a workshop in Japan for the Centre for Bio-Energy with exactly that title: Sensory Awareness and Reichian Release.) I seemed to help my clients deeply and relatively economically, and I felt very ethical and happy about the way I was working.

Some years later, in 1984, I met Eva Reich, the daughter of Wilhelm Reich, the man whose work I had studied so much and to whom I felt we all owed a great debt. In our talking she asked me what I did. I thought, "Uh, oh, now I'm in trouble," because I knew that Reich never wanted his therapeutic work to be named after him. I told Eva that even though I had been trained and certified in Reichian Therapy, I had begun to integrate another kind of work into the basis of the therapeutic process. I told her that the work was called Sensory Awareness, that Charlotte Selver was my main teacher, and that her teacher in Europe had been Elsa Gindler. Then I gritted my teeth and held my breath, waiting for whatever would come from this dynamic woman who was on her eighth world tour. I was surprised and encouraged when she exclaimed, "Oh, how wonderful! My father would be so very glad!"

Eva then proceeded to tell me that she remembered being a child and going on hikes in the mountains with her mother and father and their best friends, Otto and Clare Fenichel (Otto and Wilhelm were both students of Freud), and that her father would keep asking them about the classes they took with Gindler. He would say, "Now tell me, what is it that you do?" (Reich, 1984). In our subsequent talks over the years, Eva has been very clear how she felt her father and his work were influenced by Gindler's work. Eva herself was sent to childrens' classes that Clare Fenichel taught and has talked about how much she loved the ways she was encouraged to use her body and be active and creative. She has stated several times that she does not think her father would have begun to work with the body, and especially the breath, if he had not been influenced by the Gindler way through so many of her students (Reich, 2001, 2003).

I was thrilled! I felt I was on a good track and was being supported to continue. Eva and I began a wonderful friendship that continues to this day. We spend many hours discussing her work with her father and his influence.

Explorations and Confirmations

I have had several important experiences that have confirmed for me my way of working. One was an extended client relationship that began when I was in my early "Reichian Therapy" stage.

Tom, a 31-year old male, came to see me. He presented a history of severe tension and acute pain, especially in the upper parts of his body; a great deal of nervous twitching and strong spasms; and obsessional mentality that absorbed much of his life. He stated he "enjoyed sex very much, but at the same time...didn't feel a great release." He would masturbate every night if he didn't sleep with someone. The masturbation was closely tied into a rich fantasy life. Most of his romantic relationships lasted about three months and then would end. He was not able to sustain interest in much of anything in his life -- work, recreational activities, etc.

We began to work regularly, using the general Reichian mode in which I had been trained. Our work followed the basic structure: breathe deeply, and kick and hit to build up a charge; release the charge through movements, sounds and emotions; and then allow relaxation. Admittedly, I was always one of the more gentle Reichian therapists, trying to work with the client as personally and as sensitively as I possibly could within this framework I had been taught, as well as going in actively and deeply when appropriate.

We concentrated on Tom's breathing and worked with his segment blocks, beginning with his eyes. I would physically work with his muscular armor. We also addressed his character armor -- we worked on his substance abuse and inability to sustain activities and feelings -- and to this system I added, at the end of our sessions, the craniosacral work that I had also been taught. As Tom became able to breathe more fully and deeply, his chest began to move and soften, his throat began to open from the sounds he made, and his muscles became more pliable and flexible. Sometimes tears and crying came. Memories would come, and we could understand some of his patterns and how to work with them.

It was gratifying work for both of us. As Tom's armor began to open up, so did various aspects of his life. He made a commitment to a relationship. He made better connections with other members of his family. His physical pains changed -- they lessened, he understood them differently and saw new ways to work with them, but they were still there.

We worked many of Tom's issues, and he was happier and healthier. But eventually I had to admit there were areas that we were not able to address. At a certain point I felt that we had come to a plateau and that the way we were working was not enabling us to go further. It was frustrating for me: I could appreciate the good work that had been done and I felt there was further to go, but there were delicate points I was missing, some aspects with which I was not able to make contact. Certainly there were parts of both his psyche and soma that I was not able to reach deeply enough to work with. After three years we terminated his therapy with mutual good will.

Eight years later Tom asked to begin seeing me again. I told him that my work had changed, that it had gotten more subtle. (I am not sure that I told him I was incorporating Sensory Awareness, because I am not sure I consciously knew at that time.) He told me he'd be happy to work with me and my changes. What ensued during this second sequence of therapy was exquisite and a great learning for both of us. With the clarity of the somatic tracking that SA afforded, we were both awed by the depth and intensity of the material that opened up almost effortlessly. Sensory Awareness offered such safety, such acknowledgement of my client's resources, so much honor and respect for his senses and feelings. It all coalesced into a meeting with his inner being that supported the expression of impressive depths. This is where I had hoped to go the first time we worked together!

Sometimes the sessions would begin with Tom focusing on his breath, but this time he did not have to breathe especially heavily or do anything in particular. More often, we would start with a brief verbal catching up, and then I would ask him to tune into his organism and report his experience to me. Sometimes he would tune in and respond himself to what

was wanting to happen, through movement or touch or even sound. Other times he would ask me for physical contact on a particular area of tension or pain. I would put my hands where he requested and stay with him as fully as I could. I very simply made gentle contact, as fully as I could, with one of his areas of contraction. The area would move (or not), or would give an inclination of wanting to move and in what way, and I would go with it or stay still as it directed. I would be able to "stay with" this energetic process until it was complete. I did not attack his armor or devise exercises for him to do. I just stayed with him as completely as was possible.

In the beginning of this stage of our working, the spasms could be clearly perceived, and I could relatively easily feel the releases and resolutions that evolved. Reich's methods that I had used in our previous time of working -- moving the eyes to help open the ocular block, making sounds to help release the throat block, etc. -- combined very well with what I was doing and were easily incorporated. As we continued to work and as many of the obvious muscular spasms were resolved, the work became more subtle and more glorious.

It seemed that I was meeting Tom at a pulsatory level and that I could work with those pulsations --some were stymied and almost non-existent, and some were fiercely defensive and overreacting. Working from my Sensory Awareness experiences, I could meet him and stay with him. Incomplete energetic patterns were able to be satisfied and completed, and overacting ones were resolved and released. Sometimes it felt like riding an energetic wave. I could go with it and feel the release and resolution when they naturally occurred.

The work was wonderful and gratifying for both of us. It felt as if "knots were being untied" (Tom's words). Movements, actions, even situations, could be fulfilled and carried to completion. By my simple touch and my staying with it, I could help Tom come into contact, acknowledge what was happening, and work with it, and he could come to what he called his "authentic reactions." Tom felt feelings "unimaginably deep and sweet," and recollections -- some of them memories and some of them energetic -- were experienced and integrated. He began to speak about a heretofore unknown "bodily confidence" and connection. Eventually, he was able to admit experiencing pleasure and to "sustain feelings" that he had previously escaped or refused to allow.

We were both impressed at the depth and intensity of the material that had opened up. This does not mean that infantile or even pre-natal material had not arisen in our first stage of working. It had, but the quality of the experiences and the capacity for resolutions were very different this time. Emotions and sensations that we worked so hard to access in the earlier work came flowing freely now, at just the right time. He was clearly opening up organically.

Previously, Tom said he experienced his chest as having a "steel plate" in it, which eventually softened and moved. This time, it began to feel to him more like an "iceberg floating off," which gradually got softer and more movable and pliable, allowing much more comprehensive fullness of feelings than before. Through his sensing work many memories and understandings came to Tom, with clear perceptions and organic directions of how to live his life well and also how to negotiate and integrate the ghosts of the past. Tom began to speak about a "clarity" within himself for which he was grateful and from which he could learn, and an ability to experience a depth of emotions that was moving and gratifying.

Tom's life began to demonstrate his strength and clarity. He made important decisions needed to follow a life that made sense and was satisfying to him. After some time, we terminated again. I trust Tom is continuing his life work of sensing and following his authentic impulses.

Somatic Reclaiming

Many people had asked me what I called my work. (By this time I had stopped using that unwieldy name, and I really didn't have a name.) I kept on saying that I was just working the way I felt best...working with the whole person. I felt I was very much following a grand tradition, for Elsa Gindler never named her work. When she was asked what she called it, she sometimes said, "*Arbeit am Menschen*," which could be translated as "working with the human being."

One day, after an unusually deep and precious session, Tom asked me again if I had a name for my work. I said it was "Somatic Reclaiming." It was clear to me that I was not teaching anyone anything special, anything new, but that my job was to help them find their way back to reclaim their senses, their sanity, their sense of self that they had as their birthright...and that it was Sensory Awareness that was giving me the clarity to do so.

The Meeting of Sensory Awareness and Psychotherapy

Charlotte Selver was not a psychologist. She didn't put much stock in psychotherapy. In fact, she strongly felt that SA was enough and that if people continued with their sensing, they would resolve their issues. However, her teacher, Elsa Gindler, did have an interest in psychotherapy that came through her own colleague, Hendrick Jacoby (Weaver, 2004).

Many psychotherapists of varying methods have learnt from SA. Many have knowingly incorporated SA into their own psychotherapeutic work, Fritz Perls being one of the most notable (Gregory, 2001). I think many more have unknowingly integrated SA into their therapeutic processes. In fact, I sincerely believe that every somatic psychotherapist includes Sensory Awareness in their work, whether they do it consciously or not. Personally, I don't see how we can be somatic psychotherapists without Sensory Awareness as our foundation.

Teaching Sensory Awareness in the Context of Somatic Psychology

In the twenty-five years I have been teaching at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, I have been able to establish courses in both Sensory Awareness and the Psychology of Wilhelm Reich. This was a wonderful ground for me to begin to create the kind of training I believe is necessary for somatic psychotherapy: to have a basis in Sensory Awareness and then continue the sensitive somatic inquiry into clinical applications in more professionally-oriented courses. The success of this work at CIIS gave me the support to create the doctoral program in somatic psychology when I co-founded Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. For me it was organic training – education from the inside out. In the first year of the program, students did a lot of inner exploration, with courses in SA from the perspective of their experiences as individuals and in interaction with others. The second year's classes in SA expanded to "Sensory Awareness as Process and as Therapeutic Tool," and the third year developed further, into "Sensory Awareness in Clinical Practice – Supervision."

It is my experience at CIIS and SBGI, and now at JFK (which also includes a practicum in SA as foundational in their Som Psy program), that the Sensory Awareness component allows students to take the time to focus on tracking themselves and their own senses. Then, from that center, they can branch out into the clinical relationship. This greatly informs their clarity on transference and counter-transference and gives them skills to help ground themselves and know themselves in a very real, visceral way. Sensory Awareness work also helps them to share their experiences clearly and to draw on these experiences when working with their own clients and students.

Other Countries, Other Therapies

In 1972, I offered classes in SA to the first group of Japanese psychologists who came to visit Esalen. The leader of that group was so impressed by SA that he returned to Japan and changed his teaching of psychology and counseling, creating "New Counseling," which incorporated SA. He also founded the Japan Association of Humanistic Education. In 1988 Charlotte asked me to go to Japan in her place to lead workshops for JAHE. Since then I have continued to offer workshops in SA in Japan and other countries (Weaver, 1997-98). I have been honored to teach outside the U.S. and to work with therapists from other cultures. It is always my experience that no matter how different the trauma or the culture, the common place of meeting and communicating can be through SA. There we all have a common language (Weaver, 1997-98).

I was part of a group of somatic therapists who conducted the Clinic for Survivors of Political Torture for some years in San Francisco. Of course, we all felt that the best way to work with these people to assist their healing was somatically. My experience was that SA was the best tool I could share with them.

With the Holocaust survivor who was a hidden child during the war, we worked on finding and hearing her voice so that she could express herself appropriately. We also used SA to work with centering and grounding so that she could relax, stop injuring herself so much, and eventually realize that she was really, finally, safe. Breath was a very important aspect here. The process of finding her breath--learning to allow her breath, learning that she did not have to control it, that it could speak for her and be resourceful and supportive--was a huge assist and change in her life.

With the men who had fought and been tortured in their wars, an essential part of their healing was to help them release the traumas of the past by finding their way to their current sensory experiences, and be able to differentiate between past and present.

The latest growth and development in my own work over these past ten years is in the essential field of prenatal and birth therapy. How wonderful and important it is when we can work early with the early traumas! How invaluable it is to have SA skills to track oneself and also the infants, and to help the parents do so too. Since we are essentially working nonverbally with infants, it is even more crucial to have these sensory awareness skills.

It Works Both Ways

Sometimes I have clients who come to me for Sensory Awareness sessions, and our work turns into somatic psychotherapy.

Nancy was a student of SA and came to me as a Sensory Awareness client after we met and talked at a workshop of Charlotte's. During our first session, as I put my hands on her shoulder, it became evident that her tightness there was holding on to more than just physical tension. As we worked with issues of mother, family boundaries, abandonment, her creativity, and so on, the somatic psychological work would at times direct us back to her left shoulder. Sometimes I would touch it, sometimes she would make the physical contact herself. Her shoulder became something of a touchstone in our work together, and the sensing process was a wonderful guide through her psyche as well as her more physical aspects.

Sam came to me after having done some workshops with Charlotte and classes with another leader. He had never done therapy and wanted to do some individual work in SA. As we worked somatically, it became clear that other psychological issues were intertwined. We are now doing psychotherapy, even though his sessions are still largely devoted to the sensing work. He begins by checking in to whatever is happening with him in the present moment, following his breath or addressing

whatever other physical experience is most acute for him. When emotional issues come up, they are smoothly incorporated and integrated. Sometimes he arrives with an emotional issue and we begin there. By being able to work somatically as well as facing the emotional roller coaster, the issues become clearer and are more easily dealt with from the basic grounding of the sensory awareness. He has come to use SA as his daily meditation and says it works well for him as something to return to for support during the day and especially helps him in dealing with his emotions.

More often I have therapy clients who, realizing the benefit of the sensing work for their well being, pursue Sensory Awareness practice further by taking classes and workshops offered by SA leaders.

Sandy is a psychologist who heard of me through a Reichian therapy resource. Because of her intellectual and academic orientation, it definitely took some time and repeated changes of focus to attract her away from her interpretation, knowledge, and thoughts and toward her senses and other bodily responses. I would frequently direct her back to her breath and question her about her sensations. As she progressed, she was intrigued and astonished at the depth and breadth that our work could go with the inclusion of sensory awareness. She was amazed at what information she received by paying attention to micro-movements and giving them their expression and full movement. Physical patterns she had been using for years without connecting very much with them now told a story that she had long forgotten and that played a very important part in her life. She was so intrigued with the sensory awareness that she began taking classes with Charlotte and is now investigating further study in somatic psychology, so that she can integrate all this into her own professional work.

Either way it works, and I'm ever grateful for the lineage, the leaders throughout the world, and their creativity and devotion to the simple work of somatic inquiry.

Charlotte Selver was a dynamic force. She encouraged people, she insulted some of them, she inspired many. More than she knew and more than most of us know, she has influenced many forms of psychotherapy, mainly somatic-oriented psychotherapy. We are indebted to the integrity of her work.

Resources

Sensory Awareness Foundation: www.sensoryawareness.org.

Sensory Awareness Leaders Guild : contact through www.sensoryawareness.org.

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Please note: all names and incidents cited in this article have been changed to protect the identity of the persons.

Biography

Judyth O. Weaver, PhD in Reichian Psychology. Having studied with Charlotte Selver since 1968, she is authorized to offer Sensory Awareness and has led intensive month-long seminars as well as shorter classes and workshops through out the world. She is certified as a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner, in Craniosacral Biodynamic Therapy, and in Prenatal and Birth Therapy. She is a Rosen Method practitioner and teacher and having been authorized to teach T'ia Chi Ch'uan in 1971, has been recognized as a master teacher for 33 years. Judyth has been professor at California Institute for Integral Studies since 1979, teaches Sensory Awareness practicum at John F. Kennedy University, and is co-founder of Santa Barbara Graduate Institute and creator of its Somatic Psychology doctoral program. She maintains a private practice in Mill Valley, California and regularly teaches internationally.