



SAFletter

Newsletter of the Sensory Awareness Foundation

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Child Rearing – A Great Misunderstanding

by Jeanine Buol Hug



The photos of the adventurous little Maria are by Marian Reismann, courtesy Jeanine Buol Hug.

The healthy child is born with the full potential to develop into an independent human being – a person who can also skillfully handle the achievements of our culture. But we think we *need to rear* our children in order for them to develop. We bring up our children the way we have been brought up: we show them how to do things, we help them, praise and punish them – we interfere with the children's explorations of themselves and their environment. We interfere because we don't trust human nature, because we don't know about our "natural equipment" (biologische Ausrüstung), as Jacoby called it; we interfere because we are out of touch with ourselves and don't recognize what is necessary and useful.

However, these little human beings are in full touch with themselves (their weight) and in constant interplay with their environment (the ground and gravity). When a child falls, he gets up again, he falls again and gets up once more..., until his legs and feet become balanced and stable, until this stage of his development is completed. Only then will he take the next step in his development – and not a moment earlier – because that's when he is ready for the next step. To stand without outside help and support – that's what it means to be independent (the German word for independent is *selbständig*, to stand on one's own). Children are guided by a 'sense for what

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Our two most recent publications:

Waking Up

The Work of Charlotte Selver

by William C. Littlewood with Mary Alice Roche.

Talks about Sensory Awareness, Reports, Experiments, and Exchanges with Her Students.

Every Moment is a Moment

A Journal with Words of Charlotte Selver from her 102 years of living and over 75 years of offering the work of Sensory Awareness.

(For ordering information see page 9.)

Dancing in the Dharma

The Life and Teachings of Ruth Denison

Excerpts from a new book by Sandy Boucher, published by Beacon Press, Boston.

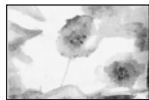
Before Ruth Denison became the first Buddhist teacher to lead an all-women's retreat, she survived years of horror in Nazi and post-war Germany. Once a friend of Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, and Timothy Leary, and a student of Charlotte Selver, Denison was also the first teacher to use movement and dance to instruct her students in mindfulness. Eighty-three-year-old Denison still leads retreats at Dhamma Dena Meditation Center and feeds the coyotes near her home in the Mojave desert.

Now in *Dancing in the Dharma*, Sandy Boucher celebrates the life and accomplishments of "one of the pioneer teachers of Buddhism in the West." Drawing on

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RUTH DENISON... (continued)

*countless interviews with Denison, her associates and students, Boucher portrays the experiences and instincts that has made her one of the foremost teachers of vipassana meditation, and led her to apply the techniques of Sensory Awareness to the endeavor of cultivating mindfulness.**



The explorations of the counterculture were led by men who had lived through the devastation of the Second World War, people who had seen the worst in human nature and who hoped to so transform our collective consciousness that we would never again commit the atrocities that had ravaged the Western world. Erich Fromm, a German Jewish psychotherapist, who sometimes joined Henry and Ruth at their house, was typical of these men. In his *Escape from Freedom*, he defined freedom as the realization of one's individual self, "that is, the expression of [one's] intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities." The seekers of the counterculture aspired to achieve this expression. Their investigation was all about finding ways to open to an enlarged, more authentic humanity. For some that might lead to "God" or transcendence, to gaining access to deeper psychic-spiritual truths through drugs or meditation practices. Swami Vivekananda, the Advaita Vedanta seer, said that "Man is like an infinite spring, coiled up in a small box, and that spring is trying to unfold itself".¹⁸ Henry and his friends strove to find ways to uncoil themselves and open into their seemingly infinite capacities.

Among these male proponents of transformation, one woman came to be recognized for her work in cultivating awareness. This was Charlotte Selver, founder of the Sensory Awareness method, who became Ruth's first teacher. [Charlotte would not have agreed with this. As a devoted student of Elsa Gindler she did not consider herself to be the founder of a method. slg]

It made eminent sense that Selver would touch Ruth, for Ruth lived in a sensitive, nuanced relationship with her body. Since she was a child running through the grass of a meadow, spreading clothes to dry in the sunshine, sitting with the pigs and geese while they ate, reveling in the smells and textures and sights of nature, she had been attuned to the material universe, beginning with her own body and opening out to the world around her. The abuse and wounding of that body after the war had not alienated her from it; she continued to reside in its wisdom, which withstands violation, springs back from injury. She had fully experienced the attacks upon her, not splitting off or dissociating, so that, when they were over, she was able to leave them behind. In Henry's house, surrounded by men talking of the life of the mind, she had not been touched. But when Charlotte Selver arrived and began to explore the intricate complex of sensations that arise in the physical being, Ruth woke up. Charlotte spoke directly to what Ruth already knew; Ruth saw that with Charlotte's instruction

she could penetrate more deeply into the experience of her life as she lived it in each moment.

Meeting Ruth Denison in 1980, I did not know that the underpinning of her work had come from Charlotte Selver. The sensitivity to body that Ruth taught us, her constant guidance to be aware of the sensations arising this very moment in us – this was a revelation to me, and a great opening and deepening. It was the very first time that someone had asked me to be aware of my standing posture, for instance – to feel the touch of my feet on the floor, to pay attention to all the subtle adjust-



Photo of Ruth Denison by Pat Meyer

ments the body makes in order to hold itself upright. Over and over, Ruth brought us back from our thoughts, plans, fantasies to the reliable ground of our bodies. This had the profound effect on me of opening me to the reality being experienced in the present moment, that nexus where life is really taking place. That was the beginning of my understanding of and practice of Buddhism.

The Buddha identified the body as the First Foundation of Mindfulness. In Ruth's later investigations of this principle, she had a brilliant insight: she would apply the techniques of sensory awareness to the endeavor of cultivating mindfulness. She continued to practice and teach using sensory awareness as she developed as a Buddhist teacher, and some aspects of her approach have been incorporated into the teaching of many more conventional vipassana (insight meditation) teachers. But before Ruth had been exposed to Buddhism, she found her first guide to awareness of the body in Charlotte Selver, in her own living room.

It was indirectly, through Erich Fromm, that Selver came to Hollywood. In New York City in the mid-forties, Fromm

found his way to the studio of a German Jewish woman, Charlotte Selver, who taught practices she called “Sensory Awareness.” Selver, ten years older than Ruth [Charlotte was in fact 21 years older than Ruth.slg], based her work upon the discoveries of a German physical education teacher named Elsa Gindler. Having studied with Gindler, and later having taught Gindler’s method in Germany, Selver brought the work to the United States, where she opened her New York studio in 1938. [Although Charlotte arrived in New York in 1938 and soon



made her first attempts to offer the work, she did not have her own studio for some years. slg]

Fromm thought that this method led to a more relaxed and alert participation in daily life, and was so impressed that he declared it “of greatest significance for the full unfolding of the personality.”¹⁹ He promoted Charlotte Selver, securing a teaching position for her at the New School for Social Research, and later inviting her to speak at the Conference on Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis in Mexico, where she met the great Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki. The parallels between sensory awareness and Zen soon became apparent. Selver read Alan Watts’s *The Spirit of Zen* and, “amazed and fascinated,” decided that on her next visit to California she would visit Watts. After meeting her, Watts attended one of her New York seminars, and immediately took to her work, saying that Selver actually did what he talked about. He began to lead joint workshops with her in New York City.

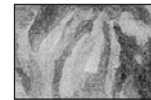
“She can take absolutely anything –“ he said, “the floor, a ball, a rock, a bamboo pole, a glass of water, or a piece of bread – and get you to relate to it in such a way that the harsh dualism of what you do and what happens to you is transcended.

She puts you in love with the simple fact of physical existence.”²⁰ He told Henry Denison about this exciting teacher, and Henry began to consider sponsoring Selver to teach in Los Angeles. Selver agreed to come and meet Henry at his house. (...)

Soon Ruth would find that Charlotte’s teachings came to her aid in a spiritual setting, and she would begin her life’s work of exploring the sensations of the body to ground herself strongly in the present moment – the base from which to access the great truths of the universe.

By the time I encountered Ruth Denison, when she had become a mature Buddhist teacher, she had developed numerous ways to apply sensory awareness to the teaching of mindfulness. She would lead us in slow stretching exercises, reaching an arm to the side, pausing to be aware of all the sensations of weight and muscle tension involved in that action. She would have us lie on the floor and feel our bodies sinking as our spines relaxed. She would take us out into the desert and guide us in moving mindfully in a circle, lifting one leg, swiveling the torso, setting the foot down again with full sensitivity to the touch of foot on sandy soil. Whimsically, she had us dance in full awareness of our skeletons, shaking our bones. All this served as an invitation to me and the other students to enter into the complex subtle reality of lived existence, to be present for the actual moments of our experience.

Ruth has so thoroughly welcomed and integrated her early work with Charlotte Selver into her life and Buddhist practice that it comes out in myriad obvious and sometimes very subtle ways while Ruth teaches. Nowadays, there is no way to separate her understanding of Buddhist principles and practices from her ability to penetrate the sensations of the body, but it is a sure thing that Ruth’s extraordinary physical sensitivity and her ability to awaken her students to this were nurtured, first and foremost, by Charlotte Selver.



18. Quoted in Isherwood, ed., *Vedanta for Modern Man*.

19. Quoted in “Sensory Awareness: The Work of Charlotte Selver” (brochure). Sensory Awareness Foundation, Mill Valley, CA.

20. Watts, *In My Own Way*, p. 196.

* *Excerpt from the Beacon Press press release.*

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Sandy Boucher, a leading spokesperson on women and Buddhism, conducts retreats that combine meditation with writing, exploring the compassionate teachings of the Celestial Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kwan Yin. She is the author of eight books, including *Hidden Spring: A Buddhist Woman Confronts Cancer* and *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*. She lives in Oakland, California, with her partner.

For a copy of *dancing in the dharma* visit your independent book store or go to www.beacon.org.