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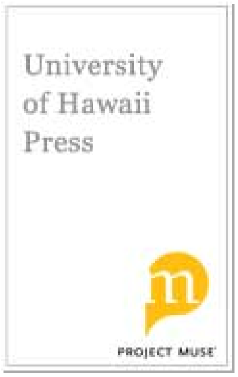

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MAKING THE WORLD MY BODY: SIMONE WEIL AND SOMATIC PRACTICE

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> To study the way with the body means to study the way with your own body. It is the study of the way using this lump of red flesh. . . . Everything which comes forth from the study of the way is the true human body.
> The entire world of the ten directions is nothing but the true human body. The coming and going of birth and death is the true human body.
> Dōgen

"This lump of red flesh" (Tanahashi 1985, p. 91): seven centuries after Dōgen composed these words in Fukakusa, they find resonance in the journals and hastily completed essays of Simone Weil (1909–1943). Like Dōgen, Weil gave philosophical expression to the intimacy and spaciousness of life lived in wakeful attentiveness. Her growing corpus of writings, however, was interrupted as abruptly and prematurely as her own fragile body during the summer of 1943. Both body and philosophy took shape through a compressed life of war and illness, philosophical study and manual labor, prayer and death; and while Weil's philosophy grew directly from her personal experiences, those that counted heavily were the most pronounced in their somatic aspect. As she surveyed the possibilities of her own existence in a fractured Europe, Weil also wished to construct a philosophy of bodily, or somatic, practices. Her aim was to understand which practices might break open the human perspective and free it from a history of mediocre moral and religious conditioning.

Although this particular aspect of Weil's thought was unfinished at the time of her death, tracking her movement toward a conclusion reveals her enormous creativity as well as the striking tensions in her attitudes and thinking concerning the body. At the same time that Weil breaks interesting new ground in the philosophy of the body, her investigation is limited by philosophical assumptions that see the body as separate from, and inferior to, spirit and ideas. In the following discussion, my main objective is to introduce Weil's thinking about the body and somatic practice, but I will also develop comparative analyses with Japanese Buddhist practice and offer some suggestions for further research in the philosophy of somatic practice.

Apprenticeship, Reading, and the Body

Inspired by her beloved teacher Alain (Emile Chartier), Simone Weil developed a philosophical interest in the body comparable to that of her contemporary and fellow *normalien,* Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But while Merleau-Ponty would go on to make his great contribution to the phenomenological movement, Weil's interest in

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the body and epistemology would take, for a time, a direction that has been compared to Wittgenstein's, where perceptual and conceptual life are linked closely with practical activities and language (Winch 1989, pp. 18–76).

During the 1930s, Weil's religiosity intensified manyfold; and her interest in the body soon extended deeply into metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual directions, although she often sought to integrate this work with a grounding interest in epistemology and the importance of knowing with or through the body. As her religious sensibility gained momentum, it could not be distinguished from her long-standing moral and social concerns, and her interest in the body led her to write energetically on the need to realize a spirituality that had physical labor at its core. It was in this context that the idea of apprenticeship became a preoccupation of Weil's. "Apprenticeship" formed part of her argument for implementing a new system for training skilled workers in France, but the notion pointed well beyond the problems associated with vocational training (Weil 1956, p. 496; Weil 1987c, p. 59). Weil sketched ideas in her *cahiers* about a special kind of apprenticeship—one in which the body would play a major role—whose chief value would be moral and spiritual, because it would train the apprentice to "read" the world differently.

This idea of "reading" *(lecture)* the world is important for Weil, and it links up some of the epistemological, somatic, and religious lines of her thought. Recalling ancient Christian views at the same time that she anticipated contemporary hermeneutical philosophers, Weil believed that the world is like a text that can be read on a variety of levels.[1] Like Husserl, Weil thought that all of our significant perceptions, such as when we are able to identify a perceived object, have meanings as their objects. She rejects the empiricist view that there is a body of perceptual data—brute sensations or facts—that is given independently of any interpretive framework. Rather, what is given, what grips the perceiver *as if from without* and as such is neither arbitrary nor under the direct control of the subject, are meanings themselves, while the sensory appearances, which Weil describes as "occasioning" these meanings, are barely noticed (Weil 1946, p. 1). Thus, the world comes to us in a mediated fashion: whatever presents itself does so only by virtue of being "read" by us, just as a text becomes accessible only if we can read the language in which it is written.

But to read meanings through the occasioning appearances is not merely to say or identify what is presented, nor are these meanings presented abstractly. Readings can affect us as concretely and as involuntarily as a fist-blow to the stomach, and they reveal a world that is shot through with values of all kinds. These values make especially apparent the self-referring quality of our readings, such as when a person appears hateful to me because he threatens some project, ideal, identity, or desire of mine.

Weil says that "not to read is impossible," which suggests that any time we have a significant perception we are engaged in reading meanings through the medium of appearances (Weil 1946, p. 2). But this does not imply that the quality of our readings is uniform, and, in fact, Weil's only extended essay on reading indicates that she had not yet arrived at any satisfactory criteria by which one could judge the merits of a reading: "Texts of which the appearances are written characters take hold of my soul, release it, are replaced by others; are some worth more than others? Are some more true than others? Where is one to find a standard?" (Weil 1946, p. 2).

As might be expected, this search for a means of determining the worth of a reading is, for Weil, the proper method for posing questions about the moral import of a particular situation. Rather than asking whether an action, desire, or object is good or bad, right or wrong, better or worse than another, what we need to do is ask whether our reading of a thing or situation is better or worse than another possible reading, and we must ask by what means we can pass from one reading to another:

> The problem is perhaps worth dwelling on, put like this. For put like this, it presents together all possible problems of value in a concrete way. A man tempted to appropriate a deposit will not refrain simply because he will have read the *Critique of Practical Reason;* he refrains, perhaps even [if] it seems to him in spite of himself, if the very look of the deposit seems to him to cry out that it should be returned. Everyone has experienced similar states, where it seems that one wants to act badly but cannot. To ask if the one who looking at a deposit reads in this way reads better than the one who reads in such an appearance all the desires that he can satisfy in appropriating the deposit, to ask what criterion permits one to decide it, what technique permits one to pass from one reading to another, is a more concrete problem than to ask if it is better to keep or to return a deposit. (Weil 1946, p. 4)

As this passage suggests, Weil thinks it is our readings and not abstract principles that determine how we act. And true to her modern, Cartesian roots, she seeks some epistemic principle or guide to help determine the better from the worse reading. Although a perusal of her texts suggests that Weil's concern with reading is very much in accord with Asian traditions emphasizing enlightened or "true" seeing, she seems intent on developing reading criteria available to everyone and not simply to those who are able to benefit from the guidance of a teacher and special-practice tradition. Weil seems not to appreciate, for example, the Buddhist sensei's role in helping to free her student from unskillful ways of seeing. It may be the case, however, that like Dōgen, Weil failed to find any true teachers in her own country and was not optimistic about the possibility. At any rate, Weil shares with her Asian counterparts the idea that the perspective of everyday life consists of a network of readings, and all the experiences that are informed by this network—desires, motives, actions, sufferings, projections, thought, attachments, self-interpretations, and so on—form the basis of the self or ego. The "I" is first and foremost a way of reading the world.

Shifting Readings

By 1942, Weil was satisfied that the solution to her question about how to bring about a shift from one reading to another was to let the body mediate. She seemed certain that the cultivation of the body—habits developed, training received, practices performed—plays an enormous role in the manner in which one reads the world. The reason the body must play a major role in shifting from one reading to another has to do with the foundational role bodily activity plays in the perception of an ordered world.

According to views Weil developed early on, the perception of "necessity" or order in nature (and later, in human beings) is a kind of dance performed by the body-subject and the world. Peter Winch has elucidated this dance most clearly and fully, and reveals its two main aspects. First, there are the reactions of the body to the stimuli it encounters, reactions that depend on the body's unique physiology. Although there is a huge variety of stimuli, the body's limited reactions produce general classificatory schemes, as when, for example, a similar response of salivation occurs upon encountering a number of different objects. This similarity of response generalizes this variety of stimuli as food. Weil thought that these original responses are modified through experience and learning (Winch 1989, pp. 42–44).

The second aspect of the perceptual dance has to do with the movements of the body, movements that contain a kind of somatic "knowledge" of geometry. According to Weil, everything we encounter suggests movement: a chair suggests sitting down, and stairs climbing up. This movement is necessary, Weil thinks, to develop our perception and conception of objects, and time and space generally. A simple change of sensations (as in some empiricist accounts) cannot provide it (Winch 1989, p. 44). Moreover, our movements embody a geometrical knowledge, as for example, when we walk to a destination by following a straight line (Winch 1989, pp. 45–47). The geometry of our anatomical design also contributes to the structure of our perceptual field, according to Weil, and the way our movement is conditioned, including the way we are able to use tools, expresses a somatic geometry rooted in the imagination, which itself is part of the body. Placing one's foot on the blade of a spade and positioning the body and spade at particular angles is one example (Winch 1989, p. 46). It is this type of bodily activity that determines how objects are perceived, Weil thought, and necessity or order in the world is perceived and conceived as a result of the body acting repetitively and methodically. As we develop ordered sequences of operations to accomplish tasks, the conception of a necessity analogous to geometrical necessity is seen to apply to those things that are subject to our methodical procedures (Winch 1989, pp. 60–76).

So it is no wonder that changing our readings of situations and the world in general will involve the cultivation of certain movements and habits of the body. A full account would also include Weil's thoughts about certain uses of language; however, Weil is not explicit about how this would be woven into apprenticeship (Winch 1989, pp. 48–59).

Weil believed that the crucial requirement for going beyond a mediocre life is to undergo a shift in the everyday interpretive mode, for that manner of reading is plagued by various degrees of egocentrism. This means that normally our readings issue from a perspective characterized by illusions that place the subject at the center of space, time, value, and being (Weil 1973, pp. 158 ff.). These illusions, which cash out motivationally and behaviorally as attempts to protect and enlarge one's own sense of power, being, and importance, are rooted in the imagination, itself fueled by a kind of natural necessity, although Weil does not fully explain their cause. She claims that just as in infancy we learn to control and check the natural illusion of being at the center of space, it is possible to control and check the other illusions as well (Weil 1973, p. 159). It is the radical overcoming of these illusions and the readings they produce that holds the key to cultivating a new moral and spiritual sensibility.

But if the body and its practices play a central role in shifting interpretive modes, Weil is uncertain about which kinds of somatic practices are the most important to develop. In one of the last pages of her New York *cahier,* she writes, "The body is a lever for salvation. But in what way? What is the right way to use it?" (Weil 1970, p. 330). This passage suggests that Weil was still attempting to understand what kind of somatic practices could be developed that might effect an interpretive shift away from egocentrism and toward a perspective that realizes the requirements for moral and spiritual balance. Moreover, in the months preceding, she had become inspired by an image that she found in the Upanishads, an image of the human body whose lived-spaciousness has grown so remarkably as to encompass the entire universe: "The Atman—let the soul of a man take the whole universe for its body. . . . Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body what the stick of a blind man is in relation to his hand" (Weil 1956, p. 19).

There are some interesting reasons why this image of a universal body and the analogy of the blind-man's stick have become so meaningful to Weil. The Upanishadic text comprehends her aspiration to see each event in the world as expressive of an underlying integrity, which Weil calls "necessity." This notion issues from the Greek view, perhaps best represented by Anaximander, which envisions the universe as submissive to a principle that preserves a dynamic balance, or harmony—*dike*—among all the various events and phenomena (Weil 1987b, p. 185). In Judeo-Christian terms, which Weil increasingly used, it is the very Wisdom of God inscribed in the world as the limits obeyed by each occurrence. Necessity, or Wisdom, ruling matter as it does, also has a moral dimension that reveals, for the human being able to see, the requirements for realizing moral harmony in any particular situation.

The reason Weil thinks it is good to see necessity, in part, is that its realization implies an existential renunciation, or breaking through, of the egocentric perspective. Truly to affirm the impartial order of things, its significance and relation to our own being, is simultaneously to see that "the thing we believe to be our self is as ephemeral and automatic a product of external circumstances as the form of a sea-wave" (Weil 1968, p. 188). This renunciation of the ego allows one to "see" what the moral dimension of necessity demands and to love the world just as it is, rather than for what it provides a sense of ego.

The analogy of the blind-man's stick—something I will explain more fully further on—is used often by Weil to emphasize the fact that human sensibilities can extend into situations, objects, texts, actions: we can learn to "read through" these things to obtain additional interpretations and experiences instead of being limited solely to what is most immediate. These images come together as the body that extends in mediated fashion throughout the world, making contact, finally, with the ubiquitous necessity that orders it.

This universal body is more than simply a symbol for Weil, however. She would really like to find a way of expanding her sensibilities into the entire universe, of realizing the body that excludes nothing and reveals everything of moral and spiritual importance. Perhaps echoing Dōgen's lump of red flesh, however, Weil sees that realizing such a universal body requires practice; beginning with the biological body, one must undergo some rigorous and unusual education. She calls this training apprenticeship, but has great difficulty conceiving it. Apprenticeship must bring about a radical transformation of the biological body that extends beyond mere conditioning and reaches the somatic source of imagination, which is largely responsible for the egocentric readings of self and world. Weil emphasizes that any change in one's manner of thinking is an illusion if the body has not participated in that change; no amount of reflection or intellectual work alone can bring about the profound change of perspective she believes is possible (Weil 1956, pp. 23, 24). Inevitably, Weil thinks, the somatic practice or apprenticeship will include physical suffering, as necessity can only be contacted by the body through that means.

Weil is far from the first to suggest that a change in what we often refer to as "mind" or "mental functioning" is brought about through repetitive bodily activity. In some Japanese Buddhism and art, for example, the mind and body are conceived as a unity, and it is held that *keiko* (here regarded as training of the body) is key to the project of *shugyō* (personal cultivation) (Yuasa 1993, pp. 7–10, 25–28). As Yuasa Yasuo describes it, the goal of *shugyō* is wisdom *(prajñā),* a true seeing of being that comes when "a self becomes connected to the invisible, ultimate point of primordiality or no-ego" (Yuasa 1987, p. 98). But this point of no-ego or emptiness is realized through long training of the body in correct form: "Training or disciplining means to make the mind's movements accord with the body's. In this respect, theatrical performance, athletic activity and vocational skills are all similar" (Yuasa 1987, p. 105).

Briefly, the mastery achieved after long years of bodily practice allows the mind to be emptied during the performance of some movement, and this no-mind is taken to be artistically or spiritually authentic (Yuasa 1987, pp. 104–109). As we will see further on, Weil's intuition was leading her to similar conclusions.

To summarize for a moment, Weil sees great possibilities in the body's capacity to realize the limits or order of the material universe and to perceive, think, and act in profoundly new ways. She develops a considerable amount in common with Asian traditions that emphasize achieving or cultivating a body. We have already noted the Upanishadic and Japanese connection, and it is there in Taoism, in Confucianism, in Buddhism generally, and specifically in Dōgen and Kūkai, whom Weil did not know. According to Shigenori Nagatomo, Dōgen taught that a "true human body" is achieved only through transforming and realizing the possibilities of the "this lump of red flesh" that is the physical conditions of one's individuality. In other words, Dōgen thought that the true human body is not simply a biological given; it is achieved or cultivated through specific practices, although perhaps Nagatomo should have talked in terms of "realization" rather than "achievement" (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 164 ff.). This would emphasize Dōgen's belief that each moment is whole and complete, leaving nothing to achieve.[2] Practice and realization are one for Dōgen, so one would need to let go of any intention of "achieving" a body. Simone Weil's own version of the body as something to be realized through practice had the promise of being similarly rich.

Toward the end of her life, however, Weil was not satisfied with her views on body and practice that had developed over the preceding decade or more. She does not seem certain which practices can help break open the egocentric illusions and provide one with the ability to read natural and moral necessity. And there is a blatantly negative strand in her regard for the body, which often echoes traditional Western philosophical and religious views of the body as prison house, tomb, temple, machine, and instrument, and these echoes are both philosophical and personal (e.g., Weil 1970, pp. 21–22, 229).[3]

Unfinished as Weil's endeavor may be, it is fruitful for an understanding of her work to take a look at the somatic practices she did consider as she aspired to articulate an apprenticeship that would enable the realization of a universal body. We turn now to this, and we might try to keep in mind the question of which aspects of reality Simone Weil seeks to embrace or reject through these practices.

Realizing the Body through Practices

As I hope is apparent by now, Simone Weil had begun to develop some rather dynamic views of the body, views which suggest she believed a great deal in the power of body-centered practices, as well as of the body itself. Stated in its most ideal form, her hope was that by training, cultivating, disciplining, and habituating the biological body, (1) one would be permitted to know the world in the most intimate manner and as necessity, (2) one would experience a body that was so deeply integrated with mind and spirit that its actions would be seamless expressions of either grace or intelligence, and (3) one would live a body that included the entire universe in its scope and sense of identity.

But what has Weil developed over the years as skillful-body means that might help her put together a satisfactory somatic practice for realizing this body? We know that Weil liked to ground her views in conditions and practices that occur universally, or nearly so, and, in light of her emphasis on body activity in perception, it is not surprising that work, and especially physical labor, are given much consideration; in developing this idea upon reaching London in November 1942, she even claimed that the mission of her age was to develop a civilization founded on the spiritual nature of work (Weil 1987c, pp. 91, 285 ff.).

And indeed, as Clare Fischer has illustrated for us so clearly, Weil believed in the possibility of spiritual labor, a form of work distinguished by the presence of the laborer's consent to the often rigorous demands of the job (Fischer 1993, p. 196). Labor consented-to, it appears, includes many of the conditions Weil believes must be present for a truly fruitful body practice. It is a means by which a worker's physical movements, initially guided by intelligence and using tools and instruments, permit the conditions of time and space to be appropriated by the worker's own body. Weil's interest in this possibility stemmed from her early work in epistemology, where she developed Descartes' idea of the blind-man's stick. This refers to the phenomenon whereby the careful mastery of some tool or instrument permits an expansion of the lived or subjective body into the tool, such that there is a transference of the sensibility from the biological body into the instrument, and the latter becomes an appendage to the former (Weil 1956, p. 21). This allows temporal and spatial conditions to be experienced and read *(lecture)* in a new way, as, for example, when a sailor attunes herself to the forces of wind and sea by means of her ship. Her apprenticeship in sailing, which results in the expansion of her lived-body into the ship and its instruments, permits her to experience an intelligibility in these forces that her unskilled and panicking passengers lack. Furthermore, Weil suggests that the worker's biological body itself can become a tool for reading spatiotemporal necessity, such as when a repetitive task allows the inexorable condition of time to enter the body.

The spiritual function of labor as the lived contemplation of the necessity that constitutes the order of the world is not exercised without a period of suffering and violence, however (e.g., Weil 1968, p. 180; Weil 1970, p. 84; Weil 1956, p. 28). Weil even equates suffering with the universe entering the body (Weil 1956, p. 134), and at other times says that suffering causes space and time to enter the body (Weil 1956, p. 221). This manner of speaking should not be taken to suggest that space and time are other than the body; Weil means that space and time can finally be realized somatically through suffering. While intellectual work, and especially mathematics, is able to furnish theoretical models of necessity, a somatic knowledge requires suffering, Weil thinks, because there is no other way for necessity to penetrate our physical sensibility (Weil 1968, p. 180). Suffering is inevitable in the course of work because necessity is indifferent to human projects: although tools help, physical tasks often require us to deal with nature in a manner that is hard on our bodies, as, for example, when we lift a heavy object or injure ourselves due to miscalculation or inattention.

So physical work offers the possibility of contacting impartial order in nature and extending the limits of the body unself-consciously into tools and beyond. All of this is meant to help reduce the illusions of the ego-self, which prefers to evaluate things in light of a need for personal power and a sense of importance. And labor supported by the right narratives and traditions, community connections, tools, and educational and attentional practices can be the occasion for the exquisite beauty of the world and religious truths to enter the body (Weil 1987c, pp. 90 ff., 281 ff.).

The major problem, of course, is that work conditions and practices as Weil witnessed them during her period of farm and factory employment made for more of an "evil dream" than an intimate relation with the universe. Radical change would be needed before the laborer's "daily death" could become the consented-to toil that Weil envisioned. Moreover, labor could not be the only body practice, since some people are unable to perform it.

But there are other problems with work, and especially physical labor taken as a body practice, which Weil had taken note of in Marseilles. There, she examined the habit formation gained as a result of learning to perform physical work, and she seemed hopeful that it would contribute to skillful means for opening up the relationship between the biological body and the world such that the lived-body extends into the world:

> Habit, skill: a transference of the consciousness into an object other than the body itself.
>
> Let this object be the universe, the seasons,
> the sun, the stars,
> Let one feel space—
> Brahma is space—
>
> . . . We must change the relationship between our body and the world. (Weil 1956, p. 21)

The problem Weil encounters is that some people are merely trained by habit and skill acquisition. In other words, the worker's movements, which articulate a regular and impartial physical order, do not always translate into a less egocentric way of reading the world. She seems genuinely puzzled about Mlle. Agnes, "who could cut grapes faster than the others, without leaving a single bunch on the vines, a single grape on the ground, and saw at the same time everything that was going on on the road; level of intelligence and spirituality not very high. How does that come about?" (Weil 1956, p. 171).

Another example that Weil would find particularly interesting because of its connection with beauty—an important phenomenon for her—is that of the producers of the magnificent Sung dynasty pottery of China, as they are described by Yanagi in the *Unknown Craftsman:*

> The fact that Sung ware is decorated with superbly drawn pictures inevitably suggests that there must have been a large number of first-rate artists at work, for the technique of the brush strokes and the rendering of the figures are both remarkable. The further fact that we never encounter a design that may be called ugly or distasteful suggests also that many of the Sung potters themselves must have been highly gifted artists. Such conclusions would be wholly erroneous. . . . No famous painters of the day were hired to work for the kilns. The job was performed by boys around the age of ten, children of poor families, many of whom no doubt disliked the work and had to be forced by their parents to do it. (Yanagi 1989, p. 134)

Yanagi goes on to explain that "the easy use of the brush and the boldness of the composition resulted from the fact that each child had to draw the same picture hundreds of times a day" (Yanagi 1989, p. 135).

While Weil draws a distinction between being trained, as Agnes and the Sung children were, and the "habit in the performance of a particular type of labour [that] puts us in possession of the world," she does not seem clear about the difference, except that it has to do with attention, that a "certain quality of attention is linked with effective movements, without effort or desire" (Weil 1956, p. 170). The attention she speaks of in connection with this is the extremely concentrated attention of the Taoist archer who can hit the heart of a louse (Weil 1956, p. 170). As I will explain later, Weil's nearly exclusive emphasis on this kind of attentional practice is worth noting, as it does limit the use of other forms of awareness practice.

Although training is not as effective as is necessary, this does not diminish its importance. In fact, Weil's own asceticism and the "carnal privations" she mentions in her notebooks are probably more serious attempts at training the body, and this type of training clears the ground, as it were, for deeper somatic change (Weil 1956, p. 137). The essence of training, in Weil's terms, is conditioned reflex, and the point seems to be to alter the body's natural pleasure-seeking responses to things and situations (e.g., Weil 1956, p. 128, 325, 404; Weil 1968, p. 157). The will is employed to force the body to behave in accord with what the intellect dictates as desirable or moral, and while this does not fully uproot the desires of the body, Weil thinks it does mitigate somatic attachments. She says that "one may adopt some daily practice in a steady way, or one may say, 'I will do such or such a thing so many times' and stick to it, and one can be sure that the animals in the soul will be irritated and will cry and howl and will realize their impotence to make themselves heard" (Weil 1970, p. 232).

Although training remains important to Weil, it forms only part of a practice that would allow the body to expand into the universe. Weil must extend her blindman's stick analogy to other practices that may help transform what is felt and read through the medium of body sensations. She sees the need for a set of practices that would link people to the rhythms of nature, rhythms whose cyclical character would transform one's relationship to time. As I have explained more thoroughly elsewhere, Weil thinks our normal relationship to time simultaneously enslaves us to the future—because we imagine we will find our fulfillment there—and causes us to want to flee time—because we know that time carries us toward death and painful events. Identifying the body with the cyclical rhythms, however, would allow moments and what they bring to be experienced as equal realities and annul our egocentric perspective in time (Pirruccello 1995, pp. 45–57).

Related to this, we have seen that physical labor is one of the means for identifying the body with the temporal necessity of the universe, but this is often hampered by a rhythmless and monotonous task (Pirruccello 1995, p. 55). New machines and regimes would have to be designed specifically to produce the right kind of monotony. One can also pay attention to the feeling of rhythm in daily life, since all modes of life are bound up with celestial rhythms and the seasons: "Through this rhythm, we remain linked with the sun and the stars. We must feel them through the medium of this rhythm, as through the stick of a blind man" (Weil 1956, p. 22). Weil thought monastic rules that aimed at cultivating this sense of rhythm and circularity reflected a sense of this important possibility (Pirruccello 1995, pp. 52–53). In this regard, Weil mentions certain breathing practices, but doesn't seem to know much about them, and attention to other rhythmic bodily functions such as circulation of the blood, and presumably menstruation (Weil 1956, pp. 46–47, 103). Sport and dance are mentioned as rhythm-attuning activities as well, but Weil does not elaborate (Weil 1956, p. 107).

It is well worth noting here how Weil's aspirations begin to parallel those of Kūkai, founder of the Japanese Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism.[4] Kūkai believed that repetitive somatic practices could bring about a mode of awareness wherein no phenomenon is given favored or privileged status (Shaner 1985, pp. 86–100). For Kūkai, all events are equally expressions or teachings of Dainichi Nyorai (the cosmic Buddha). As in Weil's account, a discriminating attitude normally prevents one from reading events this way (Shaner 1985, pp. 71–73, 80–86). Had Weil known his ideas, perhaps she would have taken into her own thinking Kūkai's belief that by participating in the practices (speech, mind, bodily deeds) of the cosmic body through the vehicle of one's own human body, one can come to realize the essential identity of the two bodies (Shaner 1985, p. 120). In fact, David Shaner's account (1985) of Kūkai as using repetitive, habituated movements to shift to an awareness of all forms as equal, and of the identity of the human body with the cosmic one, seems a true complement to Weil's unfinished investigation into the promise of somatic practice.

The last set of body practices I wish to discuss briefly are forms of chant or recitation, such as Weil practiced when she experienced what she describes as her first visitation by Christ (Weil 1973, pp. 68–69). In Marseilles, she wondered if sacred chants, ceremonies, and sacraments are blind-man's sticks making it possible to touch God, and she claims that all religious practice is a form of recitation of the name of the Lord (Weil 1973, p. 182). The virtue of such practice is that by focusing attention on something perfectly pure (although this purity is had by convention only), the evil in us is destroyed or transmuted, and not allowed to sully our view of the universe (Weil 1973, p. 186). She relates that her own practice of reciting the Lord's Prayer had the effect of tearing her thought from her body and transporting it to a place outside space (Weil 1973, p. 72). Obviously, this was an effective practice for Weil, and I view this as a body practice, but she doesn't seem to include it and other religious practices in her consideration of the body. In other words, she seems to regard it as an attentional practice or prayer, and not as a solution to her question about what use to make of the body. Again, had Weil known the thought and mantra practices of Kūkai, she might have understood such practices to be a means of uniting the human being with aspects of the universe through the body (Shaner 1985, pp. 88–92).

It seems, then, that Simone Weil glimpsed possibilities in a number of somatic practices for transforming the biological body into an intimate reader of necessity, but she did not reach conclusions about their actual effectiveness or practicality for the present, nor did she answer questions about their potential integration into daily life. She is most concerned about practices in the workplace, as work is the predominant condition of humankind, but she realizes the obstacles that technology, power relations, and general work culture represent.

At this point, it seems appropriate to ask what practices are not included in Weil's experimental thinking about the body and somatic practices. After all, we have thousands of years of mostly Asian traditions to draw from, traditions that also saw the importance of cultivation through somatic practice.[5] Weil drew from these same traditions as she developed her views, although she did not seem to know Dōgen, to whom we turn now for additional thinking about somatic practice. Turning to Dōgen will allow us to see a certain pattern in Weil's work on somatic practice that may have been a problem for her.

Shikantaza

A somatic practice that Weil comes close to discovering, and that is by now well known to many non-Japanese readers, is called *shikantaza* or "just sitting," and it is usually identified with Dōgen, the "incomparable" figure of medieval Japanese Zen.[6] As I mentioned, Dōgen's writing and thought were apparently unknown to Weil. She had discovered Rinzai Zen through D. T. Suzuki's books, and she recognized in its kōan practice an echo of her own "contradictions" practice (e.g., Weil 1956, pp. 394–400, 445–446). But the Sōtō Zen tradition, of which Dōgen is considered the founder, is not mentioned in her essays or *cahiers.* I think it will be clear why an account of *shikantaza* would have been very interesting to Weil, but one might ask experimental questions about Weil's ability to recognize the value of this practice, given its non-suppressive and non-judgmental nature.

The most thorough analysis in English of Dōgen's "just sitting" practice that I know of is provided by Japanese philosopher Shigenori Nagatomo, who was educated and continues to teach in the United States.[7] To emphasize the importance of *shikantaza,* Nagatomo explains that one of the things this practice does is to transform the *saṃskāra*s, which, according to the Buddhist view of the body, are the dispositional tendencies and their energies. These tendencies are interpreted by Nagatomo and others as the source of desires and their energies, or sometimes simply as the consciousness that is infested with desire (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 111–113).

Because there is no mind/body substance dualism operating in this account, and consciousness is always somatic or incarnate, the *saṃskāra*s play a role in forming the very quality of consciousness and action (Nagatomo 1992, p. 143). As the root or ground of desire, the *saṃskāra*s are "interlaced" with the perceptions of everyday consciousness, and this also accounts for the "mine-ness" of ego-consciousness (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 100, 143). Because some of this affectivity is unskillful or unconducive to realizing a deeper form of awareness, epistemological and actional reorientation must be achieved by modification of these somatic energies (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 111–113). And this requires, in turn, a somatic means. Dōgen's *shikantaza* just is one such somatic means. Aside from changing unskillful energies to skillful ones, the transformation of the *saṃskāra*s allows dualistic tendencies to be cast off, and it also produces a change in what Nagatomo calls the sitter's "body-image": the body as experienced or lived. The body as lived expands now to include all the shaped things of the world (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 164 ff.).

Stated very briefly, and without the chapters of supporting detail that Nagatomo provides, *shikantaza* is performed by assuming a seated position, ideally the lotus or some variant, in a quiet place and with the intention of disengaging from one's affairs and environment. The breath is regulated so as to harmonize with nature, and

Dōgen instructs us to "think of not-thinking." This puzzling phrase is perhaps best approached by describing the means of realizing this mode of awareness, a means Dōgen calls "non-thinking" (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 115–123).

The means involve adopting a non-positional or neutral attitude toward the objects of awareness, whatever they may be, wherever they may originate. There is no holding onto or repression of what comes into awareness: sounds are simply heard before they disappear; thoughts simply occur and then vanish. As sitting deepens, these experiences produce less and less "residue"—reflections, bodily reactions, thoughts, judgments—and the residue that is produced is simply experienced and let go. The important point is that nothing is either censored or held onto (Nagatomo 1992, p. 119). As Nagatomo points out, if one cares to use the language of phenomenology, and especially that of Merleau-Ponty, one can say that there is a lessening of selective bodily intentionalities cast toward things in the world; the body ceases to ready itself to be activated by stimuli or to activate itself. There is awareness of sounds, feelings, thoughts, and so on, but, again, there is no attitudinal position taken toward them. This mode of awareness is induced not by reflection, nor by the will to cut off mental activity, but by the somatic form or mode itself—sitting (Nagatomo 1992, p. 120).

There are many, many more aspects of *shikantaza,* and these are described well by Nagatomo. But it is the somatic transformation that *shikantaza* can bring about that would interest Weil so greatly. Again, this transformation concerns the body's power of affectivity, the *saṃskāra*s discussed above. As mentioned, sometimes this power of affectivity is characterized as dark or unskillful, and is specified as avarice, anger, sluggishness of mind and body, restlessness and annoyance, and doubt (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 143–144). Dōgen believed that this type of affectivity will be transformed if the sitter realizes her "right dharma eyes," and realizes the true human body (Nagatomo 1992, p. 169). According to Nagatomo's analysis, this is what sitting can bring about, although I do not believe he means to suggest that this should be the intention of the sitter. The culminating experience of "casting off the body and mind"

> is a somatic transformation of negative affectivity into positive affectivity. . . . [T]he transformation yields an unequaled level of energy which had otherwise been undiscovered and untapped in our everyday existence—a consequence of the removal of the "binding," dominant force which had taken root deep in the psyche. . . . Once this transformation has taken place, in proportion to the extent of the transformation, the affectivity becomes charged with a power and an acuteness that otherwise would have been unknown. Sensory perception, empowered and refined by positive affectivity, becomes capable of detecting "subtleties" which had previously gone undetected. . . .
>
> At the same time, through the transformation of negative affectivity into positive affectivity, the empirical ego is released from the "bonds" which had unknowingly constrained the meditator's sense of self and circumscribed his/her frame of reference. The energy which wells up from the depths of his/her being shatters the high ground of the empirical ego. And the empirical ego, to use Deutsch's terminology, becomes "unbound," it has "emptied" itself. In thus becoming unbound, the empirical ego realizes

> that the selectivity operative in everyday perception is all too human; it is no longer a selectivity infested with, and motivated by, the ego-desire. It enters into the domain of objectivity—an objectivity which has been achieved through the eradication of subjectivity. Once he is unbound, the person qua body has a lived feeling of spatial spread and permeation, from which a somatic act shoots out. . . . (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 146–147)

The somatic act to which Nagatomo refers is an action that issues from the transformed body-image of the sitter, which now extends to the shaped things of the natural world. Its distinctive characteristic is that it is charged with the power of attunement or harmonization, the ability to engage the environment intimately or without opposition (Nagatomo 1992, p. 168). Moreover, there is the discernment of a situation, but this discernment is not simply cognitive, nor is it somatic. There is an integration of the intellective and the somatic, a result of achieving the true human body (Nagatomo 1992, p. 173). As Nagatomo puts it,

> [S]ince the true human body is attuned to the situation, its discernment of the precise condition of the situation enables the somatic act of the true human body to respond to the task in proportion to its demands neither excessively nor deficiently. Such an act, in other words, executes its action "rightfully." (Nagatomo 1992, p. 173)

Shikantaza, *Simone Weil, and the Dream of Purity*

To return to Simone Weil, I must emphasize how difficult it is to say how much of this description truly resonates with Weil's project. The sitter who is able to experience an expanded body and who sees clearly the status of things in the net of causal conditions may not be the one who realizes necessity, and eventually order, obedience, and the Christian God-who-is-love that Weil envisioned. *Shikantaza* issues from a non-Christian tradition, but we must keep in mind that one of the practices Weil was most enthusiastic about came from another stream of Japanese Buddhism. This is the practice of reciting the name of the Buddha, which forms part of the Shin Buddhist tradition (Weil 1973, p. 182, for just one example). This indicates that Weil felt that some practices from non-Christian traditions possessed cross-cultural value. Moreover, the recognition of the ground of the ego-self and its subsequent emptying out and the transformation of unskillful desire sound remarkably like what Weil sought in somatic practice. In practical terms, Weil would appreciate the simplicity of the practice, which many people can perform, and its ability to be integrated into the daily lives of people living in a non-monastic setting. She would likely be enthusiastic about the many sitting circles and home temples that have begun to spring up around the world, and I think the increasing use of the practice in social engagement would be exciting to Weil.

But would Simone Weil have embraced this practice had she been introduced to it? The answer to this question is itself not really important here; I ask the question simply to help throw into relief some of Weil's own attitudes and suppositions, and to find a point of assessing the kinds of somatic practices to which she was drawn. I am doubtful that Weil would have embraced the sitting practice for several reasons.

Anyone even superficially acquainted with Weil knows of the centrality that the act of "paying attention" occupies. To attend to another human being or an aspect of nature is to co-create their very existence, and in its highest form this attention is love (Weil 1973, pp. 146–147). The type of attention that Weil valued was highly concentrative. In other words, it is directed in a relatively exclusive fashion toward its object, as, for example, when she practices saying the Lord's Prayer, and her intention is to admit nothing but the prayer into her awareness (Weil 1973, p. 71). This is a valuable type of awareness to cultivate, and it is likely that Dōgen used it to focus the awareness in many contexts. But *shikantaza,* as we saw, utilizes a relatively non-selective or choiceless form of awareness: anything in the sitter's "internal" or "external" environment can move into awareness—pain in the foot, a train whistle, a proud thought, dogs barking, and so on. The sitter is supposed to be alert, but there is no move to select, suppress, or hold onto anything in particular. It is not clear that Weil would see the value in this broader form of awareness practice, although once or twice she mentions a practice that superficially resembles it (Weil 1987, p. 113).

Another aspect of this choiceless form of awareness practiced in s*hikantaza* has to do with its non-positional attitude toward what arises in experience. During the sitting process one witnesses all kinds of thoughts, sensations, feelings, judgments, images, desires, and so on. And while one does not nurture or act out any of them, one does not repress them either; one simply experiences them passing in and out of existence.

Weil's practice with regard to certain kinds of thoughts and desires—things she would describe as issuing from the "mediocre" part of her soul (her body and mind)—was rather violent and repressive. She claims one has no right to feel compassion for oneself, and a proud thought should be countered with a prolonged gaze at some bitter humiliation; any desire or feeling that distracts the work of attention should be regarded as a stranger or enemy; the body is regarded as vile; the flesh is wretched; the body is a tomb that should be used to kill the carnal part of the soul; and Weil is full of contempt and revulsion for herself (Weil 1968, p. 184; 1968, p. 156; 1987, p. 112; 1956, p. 209; 1956, p. 28; 1970, p. 230; 1977, pp. 90–91). And so on. It seems that Weil's philosophical commitments clearly affect her approach to somatic practices. In theory, she embraces the doctrine of *amor fati* and is accepting of the existence of absolutely everything, but she retains traditional views about the inferiority of the body. These translate into a search for practices that either purify, ignore, or override many human characteristics. As long as Weil was wedded to the dream of a purified human being, the somatic practices she found would not echo those that cultivate an equal openness to all phenomena.

Conclusion

Simone Weil's work certainly suggests important considerations and problems to keep in mind as philosophical work in somatic practice continues. First, Weil's puzzlement over Agnes, the agricultural worker whose expertise in cutting grapes did not appear to translate into an interpretive shift away from egocentrism, raises issues about the hermeneutical component of somatic practice.

Leaving aside the fascinating problem of how habit acquisition had affected Agnes, her example and that of the Sung children prompt us to ask what conditions, at any particular moment, give rise to a somatic practice that does constitute skillful means for encouraging a more spacious point of view. Agnes and the children remind us that not all repetitive, sedimented activity is the kind of practice that might ultimately lead to an important interpretive shift such as Weil and the Buddhist philosophers describe.

Yuasa Yasuo analyzes self-cultivation practices in terms of *ki*-energy and with reference to the kind of energetic transformations that may arise in the self-cultivation process. Yuasa has also introduced a scientific approach into the study of certain practices, and he indicates that *ki*-energy has both a psychophysical aspect and an interpretive or hermeneutical one (Yuasa 1993, pp. 117–118). His studies point in a direction that would be exciting to Weil, as she often spoke of human transformation in point of view and motivation in terms of energy. Her extensive use of analogies from thermodynamics, however, is not well integrated with any method or approach that recognizes the interpretive dimension of human energies. I have argued that Weil jumps from one type of account emphasizing energy transformation to more hermeneutical accounts without finding a way of connecting the two (Pirruccello 1997, p. 92).

To understand Agnes and the Sung children, and indeed to understand how particular practices arise, it seems we have to consider much more than the repetitive movements and skill attained. Agnes and the children suggest that we need to look especially at the hermeneutic context operating in the situation at hand.

Dōgen's writings can be interpreted as teaching that practice does not occur in an interpretive vacuum. His voluminous works often aim to help the zazen practitioner "see" certain aspects of the zazen experience. It has been suggested that Dōgen produced a kind of phenomenology of zazen, and this suggests that he thought it necessary to highlight certain features of practice/realization, and that practitioners need guidance in appreciating the significance of their own "neutral" disposition (e.g., Shaner 1985, pp. 129–185; Tanahashi 1985, pp. 69–94).

Weil herself makes a few comments about how a proper narrative must be in place for workers to realize fully the impartial order of things with which their movements accord (Weil 1968, pp. 150–152). Clearly Agnes was not, and the Sung children were not, working within a narrative or other hermeneutical device that encouraged them to realize the impartiality of nature. They were likely more interested in forgetting their task and distracting themselves from its monotony. Thus, an interesting question for future research is how the bodily movements, the quality of attention, and the hermeneutic context provide conditions for an interpretive shift.

Second, in considering Simone Weil's ideas on somatic practice vis-à-vis Japanese Buddhism—and especially Dōgen—two fundamentally different approaches to somatic practice are brought to light that may be helpful for further philosophy of somatic practice. Stated briefly, Weil wants to cultivate suffering, while Dōgen wants to cultivate our inherent harmony with the world.

As we saw earlier, Weil emphasized the idea that all somatic practice would involve, indeed would require, physical suffering. This is because the somatic center of egocentricity—the imagination—is not sufficiently affected by anything less than a robust, bodily experience of opposition between the ego's constructions and the world. Physical suffering can be viewed as a place where the ego and the world radically bump up against one another. Similar to the manner in which Descartes hoped his methodical doubt would eventually allow him to break through doubt to certainty, Weil seems to think that attentive, methodical suffering in the form of somatic practices will help one break through opposition to an interpretive mode of non-selectivity or non-opposition. Weil indicates that the imagination will simply be unable to maintain the illusions that ground egocentrism.

On the other hand, Dōgen's somatic practice begins with the cultivation of non-opposition rather than suffering. We can describe Dōgen's approach to zazen as the methodical realization of non-suffering, since it neutralizes the attitudes that are responsible for so much suffering. But this is just to cultivate the non-oppositional tendencies or affectivity we already possess. There is no need to suffer so much that the egocentric point of view becomes existentially untenable; rather, we realize our inherently non-oppositional nature—our buddha-nature—which has always been available to us (Nagatomo 1992, pp. 145 ff.).

What has been given above represents what seem to be two distinct approaches to somatic practice and suffering rooted in two different—and I use this term loosely—metaphysics. Yet without trying to make the metaphysics match, it seems the two approaches can be seen to complement each other as skillful means for lessening the habitual selectivity of much of our everyday experience. It will be up to the teacher, using the resources of her tradition, to assess the needs of her student and decide which approach to somatic practice and its accompanying hermeneutic context makes the best sense for the moment.

In conclusion, Simone Weil and Japanese Buddhism offer us somatic practices issuing from radically different philosophical assumptions about the body. While respecting their attendant metaphysical, metapractical, and value commitments, the projects discussed here share enough to be viewed as relevant to any tradition that emphasizes the importance of an interpretive shift away from habitual, discriminating forms of awareness.

Notes

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1 – See Allen 1993 and also Landry 1980 for comprehensive accounts of Weil's notion of reading.

2 – Thanks to Nicolee Jikyo Miller-McMahon Sensei, for emphasizing this point.

3 – For an excellent discussion of the traditional Western view of the body contrasted with a view of the body as an achievement, see Deutsch 1993.

4 – I would like to express my thanks to the anonymous reviewer for *Philosophy East and West* who suggested that I develop this connection.

5 – I refer the reader interested in this aspect of Asian philosophy to Kasulis, Ames, and Dissanayake 1993.

6 – Thomas Kasulis argues that there are problems with attempts to compare the thought of Dōgen with that of modern Western philosophers. Thus, Dōgen is the "incomparable philosopher." See Kasulis 1985.

7 – Another analysis that may be of particular interest to continental philosophers is provided in Kasulis 1981.

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