

Being Centered Under Pressure



Interview with Wendy Palmer

At the 2005 Summer Program, Wendy Palmer co-led, with Grady McGonagill, the workshop “Leading from your Center,” as well Aikido morning exercises. Her presence and instruction left a big impression on many people, who became curious about the basis of her work. *Fieldnotes* caught up with her in August, just before she left for Tibet to walk around Mount Kailash.

Lyn Hartley for *Fieldnotes*: *You talk about your work in terms of “conscious embodiment.” What do you mean by that, and what does it have to do with leadership?*

Wendy Palmer: For me the essence of this work is cultivating unconditional love in the face of adversity. Conscious embodiment is a way to strengthen our sense of center and to study ourselves—our energy patterns or reactions—when we are in relationship and under pressure. As we learn to recognize how we lose center, we are able to develop a more precise practice of coming back. When we develop a balanced, relaxed, confident center, we more easily embody courage, wisdom, and compassion.

Usually I start by defining *centered* as being stable, relaxed, and generous while under pressure. And the “under pressure” part is important; that is where we draw from the Aikido principles. It is one thing to be centered, skillful and compassionate when the environment is supportive. It is a whole other level to manifest those attributes when we are in a situation of strong pressure.

FN: If you are in a leadership role, it seems that it is most important to first recognize your own pattern.

WP: Yes, the practice always starts with ourselves. Once we can see the pattern with ourselves, the next piece, and the most difficult, is to accept it without trying to change it. This is where this practice really draws from Buddhist principles: being with what is. This creates a space or gap. And from that gap, it is possible to notice the opportunity to make a shift or change the pattern to a state of being that is more centered, which would represent the possibility of more compassion and skillful action.

To me, we are all leaders in some way. Whether we are leaders in the most domestic way or the CEO of a large company, it is important that we know ourselves. If we know ourselves, we can understand how to work with ourselves.

Otherwise there is a tendency to assume that the problem is “out there” – it is someone or something else. If we understand ourselves, each of us can take responsibility for working with our situation. This is how we cultivate authenticity—by being willing to look at ourselves and having the humility to understand our own patterns. That sets the tone for others; by example, we are encouraging them to examine themselves and be responsible for their own pattern.

That way, there’s less tendency to shift blame or try to fix things externally. It is important to begin with one’s own process. If you want to effect change, which is what leaders do, then it is important to embody that change. Your message is your full presence, your

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full experience. People are affected by your presence, and this makes them more willing to work with themselves and others.

For me, “authentic” leadership has to do with being willing to acknowledge one’s own patterns, weaknesses, and reactions. A leader doesn’t have to make a fool of themselves, but they do have to be conscious of their own tendencies and be able to work with them with a certain grace.

FN: You began working primarily with the Aikido world, and now you bridge several worlds. How did this happen?

When I first started working with both Buddhist meditation practice and Aikido, I discovered a big gap between my sitting or training experience and my life in “the world.” I’d sit on the zafu and work with my concentration and then I would get up and go into my house...the phone would be ringing, kids screaming. It was like two different worlds. Aikido was similar. I was having amazing focusing experiences on the mat and then I would step away and that experience wouldn’t come with me very much. Working with conscious embodiment was a way that I could start to bring my experience in meditation and on the mat into the everyday world.

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Both these disciplines are the heart of my practice, and I wanted to find a way to make them more accessible without people having to train in Aikido or attend long meditation retreats. And I also wanted to bridge this gap for myself.

FN: How did you find your way to the Shambhala Institute?

Grady McGonagill came to one of my workshops in Minnesota, where I’ve taught for a number of years. Afterwards he e-mailed saying he would like to do this work at the Shambhala Institute. This was very synchronistic for me. Thirty years ago, I was teaching Aikido at Naropa Institute with many of the same artists who are now teaching at the Shambhala Institute. For me, coming back to this group was the closing of a powerful circle. I hadn’t seen some of them for 25 years. It was amazing to come back and feel the connection to the language and the people – and how we’ve all grown. I just appreciate Trungpa Rinpoche so much.

FN: How does your work help to consciously embody theory into the world?

One of the practices I work with involves being able to advocate or assert one’s intention through energy—to clarify and embody one’s intention in a way that is compassionate and non-aggressive. Sometimes I put a wooden sword in people’s hands, and they tend to immediately become energized. Working with the shape can teach people to use good form, relax, to be focused and precise at the same time. A physical practice can give an embodied experience of what it is like to be powerful in advocating or bringing something into the world without becoming aggressive.

The conscious embodiment work creates a positive kinesthetic imprint. People develop a positive imprint in their body so that when they are bringing an intention into the world, they can remember that feeling and speak from a place of intention. Having experienced a positive imprint, they can remember what it is like to advocate, to really assert themselves, in a way that is not aggressive and that has a grace and compassion to it.

I coach people through a process that allows them to feel, while they are under pressure, what it is like to come to a place that is stable, relaxed and generous. That’s an imprint. I suggest they practice centering for 5 seconds 100 times a day – that’s about 8 ½ minutes. That’s doable, people are able to make this shift, and the body remembers what it is like to settle down, straighten up, and open up. Then they will be able to bring the feeling into focus when they are under pressure.

FN: Final question... What's pushing Wendy? Where is your learning edge?

It is fun and interesting for me to use my intuition and experience to refine and deepen the work. I'm challenged to find creative ways for people to get feedback without becoming overwhelmed. I find that for the most part they get overwhelmed quickly.

My greatest challenge is to bring this work into the world of business. To do so involves physical feedback; otherwise, it is difficult for people to tell the difference between an idea and the lived reality. How do I find more skillful ways to bring the process of working with physical pressure to people in the corporate world, for whom a handshake is just about as much physical contact they want to have?

I also think this work can be of great benefit to coaches, and I am looking for ways to bring this work into that realm. If coaches are able to work more deeply with themselves, they will be able to empower the leaders they are facilitating towards a greater capacity for wisdom and compassion.

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Wendy Palmer has been teaching classes in Conscious Embodiment and Intuition Training for twenty-eight years. She is a sixth degree Black Belt in Aikido and is co-founder and teacher at Aikido of Tamalpais in Mill Valley and author of *The Intuitive Body*, *Aikido as a Clairsentient Practice* (North Atlantic Press) and *The Practice of Freedom, Aikido Principles as a Spiritual Guide* (Rodmell Press). More information can be found at her website: www.consciousembodiment.com/