

## COMMENTARY

### Reflections on Gerda Geddes

Courtenay Young\*

*European Association for Body Psychotherapy*

*(Received 31 December 2012; final version received 22 May 2013)*

I was recently reading a particular book (Woods, 2008), one of only two about the work of Gerda 'Pytt' Geddes, which is essentially not just a very well-researched biography, but is also – in itself – a set of reflections. It is an extraordinary little book, rather difficult to get hold of, about a rather extraordinary woman, little known: Gerda, known as 'Pytt' Geddes, who lived from 1917 to 2006.

Her life and work encompassed several fields, that of early Dance Movement Therapy and she also had connections with the early world of Body Psychotherapy, though she is best known for her contribution to the world of British T'ai Chi. Since I trained with her in T'ai Chi for a year in London in about 1984, and also being a Body Psychotherapist, this made me reflect on these aspects, hence this article, for this journal.

She was born, Gerda Meyer Bruun, into a well-to-do provincial family from Bergen, in Norway: her father was Minister of Trade in one of the Norwegian governments between the two world wars. Whilst growing up, she was sent for a year to London to learn English, and as a 20-year-old, she also had a year's scholarship in the USA. She returned home in 1938 to a Europe just about to plunge itself into a Second World War.

Obtaining a job in Oslo, and registering at the University of Oslo, she immediately embarked on a dance course with a German dancer, Mary Vigman, 'who worked with expressing your emotions through dance' (Woods, 2008, p. 38), and she also entered into psychoanalysis, but, soon after this (in April 1940), Norway was occupied by the Third Reich. So, being of an independent mind, and also not liking the fact that the Germans had occupied her family house, she joined the Norwegian resistance movement.

Throughout this time, Gerda was also training as a dancer with Elsa Lindenberg, Wilhelm Reich's second 'wife' or partner, who had helped him develop his form of Body Psychotherapy (Young, 2011), and was also a trainee in (Reichian) psychoanalysis with Ola Raknes, a pupil of Wilhelm Reich's. For a short whilst, in what Michael Heller calls 'The Golden Age of Body Psychotherapy' (Heller, 2007a, 2007b), Gerda was part of the small, intimate group of psychotherapists and dancers that revolved around the dynamic figures of Wilhelm Reich and Elsa Lindenberg. Lindenberg had trained with Elsa Gindler, in Berlin, (Geuter, Heller, & Weaver, 2010) and was an early developer of European dance movement psychotherapy.

These complex interactions meant that Gerda became to understand, quite early on in her career life, some of the fundamental energetic connections between the

---

\*Email: [courtenay@courtenay-young.com](mailto:courtenay@courtenay-young.com)

mind, body and spirit, and (much later) used this, when she encouraged her students to learn T'ai Chi Ch'uan as a way of therapeutically reorganising themselves internally, and so to help them discover their creative inner potential.

During the German occupation of Norway in the Second World War, Gerda played a very active part in the Norwegian resistance, secretly distributing news bulletins from the BBC for several years, and then, fearing discovery, she had to flee to neutral Sweden. However, there, she also managed to continue both her dance training (studying with the renowned dancer and choreographer, Birgit Aakesson) and also her psychoanalysis training with Tage Philipson, another psychiatrist and pupil of Reich's. During her time in Sweden, she helped Philipson work with refugees from Nazi concentration camps, using her movement and analytical skills to help free these people from (something of) their psychological prisons.

At the end of the war, she returned to Oslo, and she managed to connect again to both of these disciplines, working with Gerda Ring, the director of the Norwegian National Theatre, who was introducing psychoanalytical thinking into the world of drama. In those post-war years, she felt she had achieved something of an apex to her life so far:

By now Gerda was almost thirty. She had survived the war, turned her exile in Sweden into a constructive opportunity that had furthered her development both in dance and psychotherapeutic skills, and had worked through the problems with her mother in a way that had enriched and deepened their relationship. Her job at the cutting edge of contemporary drama was fulfilling and used her abilities to the utmost, and she had private patients with whom she practiced her psychotherapy. Life was almost complete. Then, in 1947, she met the Honorable David Campbell Geddes. (Woods, 2008, pp. 84–85)

In an interview, she says:

This was a very interesting period of time as we were working with very avant-garde and very forward thinking new authors like Kafka, Jean Paul Satre and Bertolt Brecht. My major job was to try to analyse each character, in the plays, and help the actors to get a sense of how their characters would be. I would go through each character with the actors, getting them to think about what their body would be like, how their postures would be, how they would move what might their voices sound like. This was fascinating work, which gave me a very deep connection with the actors and the characters they had to play. I later moved to London in 1947 to use the same work at the Old Vic. (Robinson, 2003)

In 1947, she had got two grants that funded a four-week research trip to London, where she worked with Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson under the aegis of Litz Pisk (Movement Director of the Old Vic theatre which was just reaching the peak of its fame). On her return to Norway, she was introduced (by a lover, whom she had just decided not to marry) to the man who later became her husband, David Geddes, the younger son of the 1st Lord Geddes: 'I was totally swept off my feet and completely forgot about my plane to Bergen. Well, that was it, love at first sight!' (Woods, 2008, p. 91)

It was not an easy relationship, at first: she had 18 months of her contract with the National Theatre to run and he was also involved with two women, one of whom had just had his new-born son. And, although they wrote each other long and passionate love letters, she could not properly read his handwriting. They eventually married at the end of 1948, without any money, and then, suddenly, her life changed again: 'David found a job in Shanghai' (Woods, 2008, p. 97). Succinctly, she says of herself:

I was able to continue with my movement work in China and was also lucky to have a brief period working with the Peking Opera ... What surprised me was that the

Chinese were very good at improvisation. I would give a theme for a class and invite them to express what the role I gave them meant to them. They threw themselves into it which I thought was very surprising. (Robinson, 2003)

In 1949, Shanghai, one of the major cities in China, had two very contrasting nicknames: 'The Paris of the East' and 'The Whore of Asia'. But it was here, in this very surprising environment, quite near to their house in the country outside Shanghai, watching an old man in the paddy fields, that Gerda first came across what was to become the real 'passion' of her life: T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

However, before she could become more fully involved, she and her husband had to go through another wartime occupation: as, on 1 October 1949, Mao Tse-Tung proclaimed the People's Republic of China (after Chiang Kai-shek had fled to Taiwan taking most of the country's gold and silver reserves with him).

For the next two years, Gerda and David were effectively hostages in a Shanghai that changed very quickly under Communist rule. From the first day there was a clampdown on bribery, corruption, black marketeering, prostitution and other practices that had been features of the city's richly chaotic life-style. (Woods, 2008, p. 111)

She also became pregnant with the first of her two daughters, and David was heavily engaged in negotiations with the Party officials, who had 'taken over' the company that he worked for, Jardine Matheson. Eventually, after being 'held' for two years, they managed to get an exit visa in January 1951, and left Shanghai for Hong Kong.

Gerda's involvement in T'ai Chi did not really start until later, in 1956 or 1957, when living in Hong Kong, and this involvement was to occupy her life for the next 50 years. She had managed to do the almost impossible and somehow persuaded a T'ai Chi Ch'uan 'Master', Choy Hawk-Pang (or Choy Hok-Peng), to teach a Western woman – which was quite unique, then.



The Yang style, which she learned from him, was rarely taught to Westerners, and the process of learning, through close observation with very little verbal communication, was incredibly complex and difficult. Lessons started, and when he died a few months later, his son, Choy Kam-Man ('Johnny Choy') took over, and the lessons continued until she left Hong Kong in late 1958:

I worked with Choy Hok Peng for about two hours a day, every day for a period of six months. He taught me the Long Yang Form. The method of teaching was very unusual for me, coming from the background I had. There was absolutely no physical contact between us. When he eventually came to correcting me, he did it with only one finger, keeping his body very far away from me. I got the feeling that we were sort of measuring each other during this time. I had to unlearn, which was one of the most difficult things for me, all my dance technique. My body had been very well trained in a particular way of moving and I had to re-think everything. It was like learning to walk again and it took a long, long time to get accustomed to the method of movement. He wanted me to just to copy his movements and I remember him saying, 'Look see Missy, look at my foot, see it'. It was very hard work but when I realised that I had to unlearn my previous patterns of movement, I then realised that I just had to let go. This letting go and re-thinking my whole body was the best way for me to learn Tai Chi. (Robinson, 2003)

As Woods says, 'She brought T'ai-Chi from China and planned to share its treasures with Britain': but Britain did not seem to want it, and there was a longish period when nothing happened. Then she physically collapsed, as an old stomach problem had flared up into a cyst the size of a grapefruit. Luckily it was benign, and the post-operative period allowed her to re-immers herself in various aspects of Chinese culture that had influenced and supported her interest in T'ai Chi Ch'uan:

During the early 1960s she began to explore Taoism through Chinese art and literature. Taoism is a philosophy based on the laws of nature, the importance of change and renewal and the intrinsic importance of energy, or chi. T'ai chi ch'uan was her vehicle for this philosophy, as in China it is practised as a martial art with none of the allegorical interpretations with which she invested it. ('Pytt Geddes', 2006)

She then realised she had forgotten some parts of the 'Long Form' (a sequence of 108 movements) and so another struggle ensued to regain these, at one point with the aid of a film from 'Johnny Choy', now living in California. Her journey became both technical and transformational, with parts descending into symbolic dreams, as she slowly and painstakingly 'put together' the Long Form sequence and, in the process, realised the deeper significance of many of these movements. It was not until about 1964 that she actually started teaching, and, in 1970, in a new contemporary dance studio that was starting up near Kings Cross, she found 'her place' in *The Place*:

Gerda Geddes and t'ai-chi had gained a foothold at *The Place* where a new vision of British contemporary dance was being explored. She had arrived at a personal, and also at a physical, place where the three defining strands of her life, psychology, dance and t'ai-Chi, were at last to merge into something greater than their component parts. (Woods, 2008, p. 196)



Then there started a hugely significant period, not just for her, but also subsequently for the whole of the UK and the international T'ai Chi Ch'uan community. Not only did she teach three classes a week at The Place for over 26 years, but also her T'ai Chi classes were even made compulsory for first-year dance students. So, she thus significantly influenced the world of contemporary dance as well. Life had become a full circle.

In an interview with Robinson (2003), she says:

I worked with contemporary dance and I worked a lot with looking at the circularly quality of movement and also thinking about all the circles you had in your joints, and in your body; how it comes from the inside and outside.

She was an iconic figure, attracting many to her: she was friends with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. David's sister was Princess Margaret of Hesse, and 'Pytt' Geddes was a frequent visitor to Wolfsgarten, her castle in Germany, which played host to many artists, writers and musicians. She was also travelling the world and giving lectures and demonstrations in T'ai Chi Ch'uan, she made films and DVDs, she incorporated the principles of Taoism and the allegorical journey of T'ai Chi

into her teachings and ‘she was passing on not a system of movement but an approach to life’ (Robinson, 2003, p. 208).

In due course, her pupils began to teach T’ai Chi, and ‘*the ripples spread*’. Not only were dancers like Richard Alston, Eva Karcag, Julyen Hamilton, Maedee Dupres, Tim Lamford, Gudrun Gylling, all influenced deeply by her work; but her T’ai Chi pupils, like Father Slade, Sue Phipps, Catherine Robinson, Chu, Bronwen Hipkin, Thetis Blacker, Kinthissa, George Ineson, Tim Lamford and many others, were also spreading her particularly gentle way of teaching and educating, of grounding and centring, of breathing the dance and the power of living, and of the subtle energies that are involved, in dance, in T’ai Chi, in therapy, in art and music, and, primarily, in just being:

Aside from the work I had done with dance, I also worked with Wilhelm Reich as a psycho-analyst. I liked his way of thinking. He worked very much on a physical, as well as on a psychological level. Reich had talked about muscular armouring, how trauma and anger can create memory in the muscles, which are held on to. He encouraged you to listen to yourself and try and find your own inner rhythm. He also taught a great deal about diagnosis: how should you look at a person, how should you judge somebody. He always said that what you say is not all that important but it is how you say it. What happens in your body, what happens in your face, does it get stuck in your diaphragm, or does it flow through? Reich was already into the same kind of thinking that you get in Tai Chi. I had also been working with patients for several years, using psychotherapy. When I had children I didn’t do this kind of work anymore as I felt that spending so much time and energy working with the sick and unbalanced took too much out of me. I really wanted to live more for my own good health to be as healthy and as balanced as I could be for my own children. This was what became most important for me. With this work and with my work as a dancer I very much looked at people’s bodies, and how they used their bodies. I also used the methods of Alexander Lowen who worked with Bio-Energetics which was a therapeutic technique to help a person get back together with his body and to help him enjoy, to the fullest degree possible, the life of the body. (Robinson, 2003)

I personally studied for a year with her at The Place in 1983–1984, after doing the Gerda Boyesen Biodynamic Psychology (Body Psychotherapy) training in London, learning both the short form, and – whilst the actual form did not stay with me, as I never practiced it enough – the essence of her teaching, which most certainly did embed itself. One of her best-known sayings, that I clearly remember, is: ‘There are thirty thousand ways to climb the mountain. Every one gets the same view from the top’.

She taught at The Place, near Kings Cross, until 1996 and, soon after David’s death following a series of strokes, in 1997, at the age of 80, she moved away from London and the south of England to a cottage in Aberdeenshire, with the forests and mountains that reminded her of her childhood home in Norway as well as also being nearer to one of her daughters. There she continued to teach T’ai Chi classes until 2002, when she officially ‘retired’ at 85. Even then, people used to come for one-to-one lessons, and she continued to travel internationally and give talks on T’ai Chi.



The author of her biography, Frank Woods, worked with Gerda for some considerable time, and has interviewed numerous friends and colleagues and several members of her family, in order to produce an in-depth analysis, touched by some considerable insight, woven in with the vignettes on the amazing historical, political and sociological changes that surrounded her life.

Problems with madness and scandal in her family (especially early problems between her and her mother), her love affairs (and her openness about sexuality), included with her deeper feelings about herself, are all mentioned very openly and frankly in this book, which is very refreshing in itself. There are also some interesting inserts about the various well-known people and institutions that she had become involved with, and the biographer also inserts his own ‘threads’ that link the different sections of the story about her fascinating life, as well as lovely quoted extracts from her own book, *Looking for the Golden Needle* (Geddes, 1995), in which she used this phrase to describe the form as an allegorical journey towards the soul. She did not only teach the martial art aspects of T’ai Chi, as she was much more concerned with the philosophical and the connections with Taoism: she saw learning ‘the form’ as a spiritual journey. A former pupil writes, ‘Her classes were extremely enjoyable and she was much loved’ (Robinson, 2003).

Her outlook on life – having seen so many political and social changes, both in the West and in the East – is also very interesting and this comes through in the book very well: besides her being quite disparaging about modern T’ai Chi Ch’uan

teachers, saying that too many people teach without having learnt properly what they are teaching; she was also, towards the end of her life, becoming a lot more philosophical:

I no longer have a desire to teach Tai Chi anymore. That came to me last year when I was 84. One day, when I had finished teaching and I drove myself home, I suddenly thought that I don't want to teach anymore. I feel I can teach by not teaching, teach by being. And that's actually how it is for me now. The old Taoists say that when you become a sage you can decide when the time is right for you to leave this life. I hope I can live to prove that – there will always be a mystery. We can't know everything because we're not supposed to know everything, but what we do know is that we're going to die. (Robinson, 2003)

She died at the age of 88, completely prepared for it: she had taught a T'ai Chi class in the last week of her life, and went out to the theatre with her two daughters the night before her death. Something of her sweetness and gentleness also comes through in the pages of this book and in other peoples' descriptions about her. Reading these, I recaptured something of the sort of aura that surrounded her when I knew her and made her a very special person to learn the 'art of being' from. This can also be seen in a DVD of her demonstrating the long form (Geddes, 2005).

This biography, interspersed with comments about various people, quotes from her own book and author's reflections, about a little-known figure who was present at key moments in the historical development of both these disciplines of Body Psychotherapy and Dance Movement Therapy, as well as the introduction of Tai Chi Ch'üan, should therefore be of interest to all dance movement therapists and body psychotherapists, as well as to those who are T'ai Chi Ch'üan enthusiasts: indeed to anyone interested in the intricacies of movement of life within the body.

## References

- Geddes, G. (1995). *Looking for the Golden Needle: An allegorical journey*. Plymouth: MannaMedia.
- Geddes, G. (2005). *Understanding Tai Chi Ch'üan* [DVD]. Ramsay: Beckmann Visual Publishing.
- Geuter, U., Heller, M. C., & Weaver, J. O. (2010). Elsa Gindler and her influence on Wilhelm Reich and body psychotherapy. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 5, 59–74.
- Heller, M. C. (2007a). The golden age of body psychotherapy in Oslo I: From gymnastics to psychoanalysis. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 2, 5–16.
- Heller, M. C. (2007b). The golden age of body psychotherapy in Oslo II: From vegetotherapy to non-verbal communication. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 2, 81–94.
- Pytt Geddes. (2006, March 21). *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1513531/Pytt-Geddes.html>
- Robinson, R. (2003, May 13). Interview with Gerda Geddes. Retrieved from <http://taiji-europa.eu/tai-chi-taiji/more-articles/interviews/gerda-geddes>
- Woods, F. (2008). *Dancer in the light: The life of Gerda 'Pytt' Geddes*. Aberdeen: Psi Books.
- Young, C. (2011). On Elsa Lindenberg and Reich. In C. Young (Ed.), *The historical basis of body psychotherapy* (pp. 207–238). Stow, MA: Psychotherapy Publications.