

# Three Gestures of Becoming Aware

Conversation with Francisco Varela  
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## I. Three Methods of Accessing First-Person Experience

**COS:** When I was here a few years ago, you made a remark that was very meaningful for us. You said the blind spot in the cognition sciences of the 20th century is that we do not have a method of properly accessing experience. **We think we know a lot about experience, but in fact we don't.** That really resonated with many readers because we have the same problem in the whole domain of organization studies and management research. We think we know a lot about organizational experience, but the truth is we haven't found a good method of accessing the situated and living nature of organizational experiences. So my first question is whether you have had any further reflections, encounters, or experiences since our last conversation that could help us to cope with that challenge.

**Francisco Varela:** Right. There are several aspects to the question, and I'll take them in no particular order. This idea is at the very center of many traditions, but it has been obscured in the Western tradition, particularly in science. **It is as if there's a big blind spot.** What's happened since, I can answer on two different levels. There is for me the continuation of my own work, but it has also become a more generalized social phenomenon. In fact, within cognitive science in the domain of consciousness studies, this notion implies a going back to work with experience, the importance of taking *seriously* first-person experience; this has really made quite a bit of progress in being accepted.

One of its manifestations is something that we just published, a special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness*, which is also a book.<sup>2</sup> **It would have been an unthinkable book three or four years ago. Why? Because the whole point is if we want to claim that what the first person has to say about experience is fundamental, then how do you do it?** It is like \_ what do the Americans say? Walk the walk. We are trying to walk our walk. You'll see the structure of the book is a triangulation of three different things.

### **The First Approach: Introspection**

The first one is, not surprisingly, the tradition in the West that has to do with the **introspective method.** During the early days of introspectionism, it was much more radical, but then it got watered down into experimental psychology methods, for example,

verbal reports. It is totally mainstream in psychology or in cognitive science to have experiments where you ask people, Did you see this? Did you see that? Were you aware of this? This is the classical technical verbal report, which is used widely. And that's something to note, that within the main core of cognitive science, nevertheless, there is already the use and the exploitation of data that requires first-person access. It has become part of every research laboratory that works with cog-sci from the beginning of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century to use these kinds of verbal reports. There's even a huge volume edited by Ericsson and Simon called *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports as Data*, and it's a basic tool of the field.

However, having said that, that is selling it short. It doesn't do justice to the richness and complexity of what is experienced. The verbal report requires somebody there who says, "Yeah, I saw it," so there is some kind of access to experience. But it remains extremely impressionistic. It depends on the subject's spontaneous ability. **Spontaneous capacity, which is already part of science, needs to be developed further. Something that is spontaneous and natural is the beginning of the whole process of learning, where you become truly a black belt or a very competent observer of your experience, a describer of your experience.** By means of what? One key thing: disciplined regular training. Without really specific regular training, like everything else in human affairs, you stay a beginner.

Now this is a point that many people seem to have a hard time digesting, although it's so obvious. If you're going to make music you need to start as a beginner and progress, through discipline and methodical application of particular techniques, to become more competent. So that's what that book is all about. It seems that now the space is more opened up to move beyond the merely naive. We're entering subjects which are not restricted to verbal reports. **We are pushing beyond just verbal reports to all forms of other techniques of explorations and expressions, which requires a whole new methodology.**

Most important, we want to distinguish between levels of competence in this reporting. **It's like karate science. You've got to distinguish between the kid who just came for the weekend and the eminent master.** It is the same phenomenon. That is the hardest point to swallow because it means that people will have to work. In experiments you need to distinguish the strategies that different people have to do, and determine the level of competence that people need. Now the question is, what kinds of techniques are there?

### **The Second Approach: Phenomenology**

When it comes to the how-to aspect, there are two other traditions that triangulate our book. The next one is the tradition in phenomenology, which is independent from the introspective tradition. It is a tradition that was put into practice especially starting with the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. Husserl was a remarkable guy because he

actually did it. He was an uncanny and gifted individual. His descriptions, his capacity to actually suspend his preconceptions and examine the structuring, the layering, and the genesis of his own experience was uncanny — he was like a **Mozart of experience**. He knew how to do it, and he described it in many ways, but he was less interested in giving full details about how to develop that skill as a method that can be taught and practiced.

The result has been an interesting evolution within phenomenology, which is to say, how do we actually take these insights that Husserl left us and use them? Not just repeat what he said, which is what many philosophers have done, but actually *redo* it. The book contains a very good paper by Natalie Depraz called “The Phenomenological Reduction as Praxis.” So the second approach revolves around the phenomenological tradition.

### **The Third Approach: Contemplative Traditions**

And then, not surprisingly, the third approach is about the **Buddhist tradition of *samatha***, an extremely rich and well-developed practice.

So the idea is to triangulate these three approaches or points of view to develop the how-to. They are not at all contradictory with each other. They are different accumulated observations or learnings of different perspectives. **That is one of the main things that I've been doing in my own research — following the trail by taking these three traditions and trying to abstract what is common to all of them. What is it that all human beings have?** What allowed the Germans in the 1880s to be introspective or to pursue their creative interests? Or the inheritors of the Buddha Shakyamuni in the fifth or fourth century before Christ to create the techniques of *samatha*? Or somebody like Husserl to create a whole new school of thinking of phenomenology? What is common to the three practices or pragmatics in human experience? That's the main question.

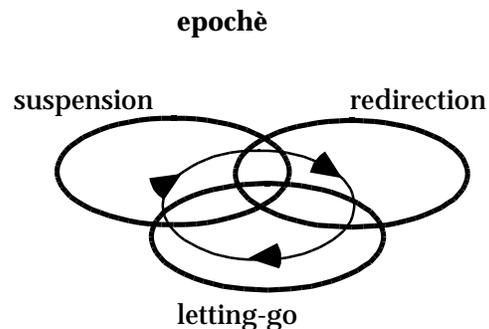
The results of this work is a book, tentatively called in English, *On Becoming Aware*. Because that's the key: how you become aware. We all know we can become aware, it happens to us all the time. You suddenly become aware of this, become aware of that, whether it be external or internal. The question is, can it be cultivated as an ability? The structuring of this essential ability is, to me, a fundamental focus of study.

So that's what I've been up to the last three years.

**COS:** Fascinating. I would love to learn some more about the commonalities between the three traditions you mentioned.

## II. On the Core Process of Becoming Aware

**Francisco Varela:** In looking at these three traditions as practices, you have to distinguish between the purely **first-person point of view and what one does as an individual from, and what I would like to call the interface between the first and second person (the third person being, obviously, the objective point of view)**. This is the view from nowhere; that's why it's the third person. I'll tell you in a minute what I mean by second person. When it comes to the first person, what seems to happen is better seen in this diagram:



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**This is what we call the core process. And the core process is the basic ability through which each individual can actually access his or her experience.** Again, we all know we can do it, so we don't really need this to do it. But it's like the fact that we all know how to walk doesn't make us into good sportsmen. If you want to become a good sportsman, you'd better understand how it is done, like the good coach does. What do you need to learn? To move your knee like this, ever more subtly, etc. This is similar. This is the basic toolkit of a good coach for explorers of experience. And this is what you call the basic core process.

### (1) Suspension

Now, obviously, it's a cyclical process, but let's start here in what we call suspension. By suspension I mean that we have this uncanny possibility of actually removing ourselves from the habitual stream and taking a break. And by suspension I mean the suspension of habitual patterns. This is where Buddhism has explored so thoroughly. You put your ass on the cushion and you move one level above your habitual engagement and see from an aerial perspective. **But what is funny about suspension is that when many people do that nothing much happens. They do it, and then nothing happens. That's why most people would say, "This introspection thing doesn't work. I look and nothing happens." Yes, nothing happens at the beginning. Why? Because the whole point is that after suspension you have to tolerate that nothing is happening.** Staying with it is the key.

## **(2) Redirection**

Suspension will lead to very early emerging events, contents, patterns, gestures, whatever. Then you can actually redirect your attention to them. That's where the new is. So the suspension creates a space, the new comes up, and then you can redirect. Redirection is a specific gesture.

## **(3) Letting Go**

Unlike our habitual paying attention, exploring experience requires what we call here letting go. It has to be a light touch. If you redirect to the phenomenon of examining experience in a heavy-handed way, you get what you ask for. In other words, you're embarked in your associations and thoughts, and again, you're overcome by your habitual mindstream. But the letting go here is crucial, because it's only when you don't hold on to the redirection that you can again go back to suspension. And this process, this core process, goes through and through and through. It doesn't necessarily go anywhere, you just keep doing it.

**In each phase there are the three different gestures of suspension, of redirection, and of letting go. Each one of these gestures is something that needs to be cultivated.** Now in phenomenology, for example, there's a tremendous emphasis on suspension. The letting go is less present, because it's much more directed to philosophical result. In Buddhism, instead, the letting go and suspension are paramount. But the redirection is not emphasized. In contrast, in introspective psychology or experimental psychology, redirection is really the most important thing. In fact, there is very little suspension or letting go. The subject is not at all encouraged to do that.

My tentative conclusion is that all of these traditions actually contain parts of this basic core cycle and that they put different emphasis on them. So you really want to have a more universal tool.

Now let me describe how first person becomes third person. In other words, what is it about an individual that allows him to have access? However, there is an intermediate position. Since we are not solipsistic individuals, we are social individuals, this is true if, and only if, we take into account what's happening in the context of the other. That's where the second-person position comes in.

**COS:** So I understand it does not work if I am just an individual out of context of —

**Francisco Varela:** It works, but it does not work. It works because you can do it. But it won't lead you too far.

**COS:** Can I ask another question? It seems what you said about the second element, redirection, is very important. Where you said this is really about paying attention to the emerging, right? When it becomes new.

**Francisco Varela:** And not to the object.

**COS:** Yes. I can also recall from my own attempt, that rather than paying attention to the new, you suspend, and then you redirect your attention to something old. So, how would you — ?

**Francisco Varela:** Well, that's the whole point, that redirection is the gesture. It is the idea that normally the habitual thing is that one should redirect attention outward. **Redirect it to what is emerging as an object, as a content, which has its own intentionality. The point about redirection is that you reverse that. You keep it within, but toward the source, toward the source of the mental process rather than the object.** And again, we know we can do that. But what exactly one does it's too early to say, but we can do it and therefore we can be competent.

**COS:** So that's really about turning, right?

**Francisco Varela:** Yes. Yeah, it's like turning inward or —

**COS:** Reverse?

**Francisco Varela:** You know the meaning of “hither and thither”?

**COS:** I don't.

**Francisco Varela:** It's Old English, and it means to this place and to that place. Looking inward is to look at a little subject inside my head. But looking hither and thither is much more spatial.

Now when you say you turn inward, it's not like you're going in. **No, you keep whatever is going on in your mental process, but you follow the trail of the tendency that will move it out, that it will make you completely go with the trend of fixating on an object.** That's introspection, again, and it's key: if you don't redirect, then you don't see anything. Buddhists are much more radical and would say this redirection is really only transitory. But it's clear that you can play with it in many different ways, and it's a tool that can be used for different purposes. If you want to use it as the Buddhists do for spiritual growth, they're probably right to emphasize letting go. But if, for example, you want to make explicit knowledge that some people might have but that others need, this is a classic quandary in organizations of all kinds. Somebody knows how to do something, and when you ask, "How do you do that?" the answer is frequently, "Well, I don't know, I just kind of

do it." You might want to have that knowledgeable person make his or her knowledge or know-how transmissible by an examination, which is completely a different goal.

Our claim, and this remains to be shown, is that in all practice traditions you're going to be moving within the same basic core, just emphasizing one more than the other. And it's very important to have the whole core, because when you don't have the whole cycle you might fall into a trap and just remain suspended.

### III. Second Person

Now, with respect to the second person, to make this work, you really need the mediation of the other, right? And the other comes in here in different flavors. I like to call that the second person. Because it is not a simple first person, right? The third person is what you find typically in classical science. The first person acts and plays a new role. The second person is somebody who is not in the first person having direct access to the experience, but is interested in that first-person access. So, for example, you are the expert. You know things that I don't know. We want you to be able to teach others, so we are going to [develop] a process of trying to make explicit what is implicit. This is an old goal of many people in many fields. Now the point there is that I put myself in the position of the second person because I don't just observe you purely externally, but I don't have the first access. So what I do is to become your partner in the process.

This partner can have two modes. One is a mode which is slightly closer to the third-person position. That is verbal reports. It is what many cognitive scientists do. They place themselves in the position of admitting that you have the mind, that you can have access from the first person to what I just showed you. So they admit the position of first person, but at the same time they remain a little bit removed. They are content with taking notes and noticing whatever it is that you say. In contrast, **a more interesting second person is really empathetic**. He admits that you have in your mind an access to your experience, but this person himself knows the kind of experience you're talking about and therefore acts as a coach. **The good sports coach cannot be somebody who hasn't done the sport. The coach must have first-person access to his own experience that perfectly resonates with yours. For example, in Buddhism, you have to advance and progress in this cycle with a qualified teacher.** A qualified teacher is who? A second person. Because he can then make the process work through mutual resonance and correct it.

In our book *The View from Within*,<sup>4</sup> there is an interesting study on intuition by Claire Petitmengin-Peugeot. She tries to understand the intuitive experience by working as a coach on an explicit technique of coaching people who say they just choose what they think is an intuitive experience. And then they try to work through it in this coaching mode she induces by taking the second-person position.

Is this very confusing, or is it —

**COS:** It's not at all confusing. But I'm not 100 percent sure whether I'm really in the —

**Francisco Varela:** The second person?

**COS:** Yeah, your second point, which is that this process only works if there is a second-person relationship.

**Francisco Varela:** Well, only very, very gifted, extraordinary individuals can carry this out in a productive manner. The access to experience seems difficult to most people because it is. To go beyond just this purely impressionistic account of what one is experiencing is not easy. If you don't mobilize these tools in detail — and that requires that kind of mediation — then it just doesn't work. Do you see what I mean? The whole first person is just too demanding for most people. Human beings are not spontaneously very gifted for this process. **So the social mediation is absolutely fundamental. You might say it's not surprising; it's also essential for language,** and so forth. It's also essential for certain essential values —

**COS:** — and for social learning.

**Francisco Varela:** — social learning. But it's not obvious that basic learning, such as admitting that the other is equal to you, is something that is spontaneous; it really needs to be mediated by the social context. Is that more clear?

**COS;** Yes, that makes absolute sense. Probably it's also true that without the other, the experience of the other, you could never perceive your self.

**Francisco Varela:** Absolutely. So this is a very important antidote to the myth or the belief or the dogma that anything that has to do with introspection or meditation or phenomenological work is something that people do in their little corners. That really is a mistaken angle on the whole thing. Although there are some reasons that it is a very common mistake. This is perhaps the greatest difficulty within science. **The first reaction people have is that [the first person is] just a personal thing. That it's private. But the notion that the first person is private is a disaster. The first-person access is as public as the third person, okay?** When you have a third-person point of view, clearly you need a first person who does the measurement and does the writing, etc., but [provides] a social network to which it is going to be addressed. So a key point is that it's really not very meaningful to speak about consciousness or experiences being private. **There is a quality to experience where you need a mode of access that you might want to call the first-person access. That doesn't make it private. It's just as social as everything else. And that's something it took me a long time to discover. I had a blind spot on that like everybody else.**

#### IV. On the Sources of Becoming Aware

**COS:** If you look at the process you just described, I have an intuitive understanding of all three elements and how they interact. What I wonder is what is the cause, or what is the source from which this movement is generated?

**Francisco Varela:** That is a very good question. I've thought about this, and my tentative answer is that, first of all, it's clear that even if we don't understand what force makes this happen, we can still cultivate it. And we can make this into a know-how that's available to people for all kinds of purposes. Now as to why, the answer I would offer at this point is **we cannot but do that**. In other words, this is who we are as human beings, necessarily going through this cycle because we don't have a solid substance as individuals. The subject not being a locatable thing can only be this transitory —

**COS:** — Movement.

**Francisco Varela:** Movement. And so you follow certain trails that are given by conditioning in the past. But inevitably it's bound to be stopped by surprise, by change, by accommodation, whatever. **Life is constantly in this process of reaccommodation, and therefore this kind of cycle is at the very core of what life is all about.** Now what we are adding is taking the core of this life and making it more **explicit** so that you can cultivate it and explore it in a more disciplined way, which is what all experts in these various traditions have done. **So it's not so much what causes it as can it be stopped? It's like saying death cannot be stopped from being part of life because if it is not there you cannot have the flexibility and evolution on the planet. I don't know if that strikes a chord. For me it's an interesting lesson on learning to work with fragile ontologies. I like that notion of fragility in ontological thinking, that the way the world unfolds is very brittle, very fragile.** It goes against the grain of the great tradition in time, so it tends to make things extremely solid, solidified.

**COS:** And you emphasized the element of practice and practicing, right? Which is that you develop a certain competence in accessing this, engaging in this.

**Francisco Varela:** It is the know-how that counts, not the know-what. **When you get to this point, the know-what is only used to get started, but it is the know-how that counts and that is going to be transformative.** For organization and learning, that, to me, seems crucial.

**COS:** Yes, it is. I noticed that you use the term "praxis" and that you wrote it with the "x," which is not the usual way you use the word "practice" in American English. So could you elaborate a little bit on the difference between practice and praxis?

**Francisco Varela:** That was a bit of a philosophical twist, because the word "praxis" comes from Greek. And it really is the inheritance of the Aristotelian lineage. Throughout the history of philosophy, praxis has been used in the more fundamental sense, while practice is a little bit more operational in contemporary use. So we wanted to give to praxis — well, of course, the one who really popularized that word to a full extent is you know who —

**COS:** Karl.<sup>5</sup>

**Francisco Varela:** Karl. But that's the idea. By the way, let me show you another thing [pulls out a book].<sup>6</sup>

**COS:** Oh, yeah, I read that one.

**Francisco Varela:** It goes in the same direction.

**COS:** Yes. That was my next question. How does that process that you just described relate to the notion of *virtual self* that you develop in that book?

## V. Virtual Self

**Francisco Varela:** In fact, it's as I was trying to say a moment ago — why, you were asking, would that work? **You cannot be a virtual self unless you have this constant creation of letting go. That is the nature of virtuality. What this is saying to me is if you really want to get closer to understanding what it means to be a subject, you'd better understand that this is the constant generator of what that subject is all about — since it is not a stable, solid entity, since it is not within the head, since it is not just in language. It's in none of those dimensions, it's somehow in a figure of multiple levels of emergence, but it is always fragile.** Virtual is a more “engineering” way of speaking about fragility, which is more philosophical or ethical. But it has exactly the same connotation for me.

**COS:** So when you say virtual you mean it doesn't have the center self, it doesn't have substance, and yet it is real.

**Francisco Varela:** Right. It is real in the sense that it can effectively tackle the world with which it's coping. But that coping is constantly updating itself or renewing itself, submitted to all kinds of changes, both endogenous and exogenous. So virtuality is not just this absence of a central self; it also has that kind of **fragile flotation** of coming and going, which is where the letting go is. Letting go is an interesting gesture, because in fact it's almost like invoking the virtuality of the self, just putting it spontaneously on the table. Usually it's life that makes you let go. You know what I mean, in the extreme cases of

sickness or danger, or the disappointment of love, it just forces you into that gesture of letting it be, letting it go. It's interesting that human beings do have the capacity to mobilize that capacity all the time. That, to me, points toward a more whole or good life. What is it to have a good life? A life of wisdom is to be constantly engaged in that letting go, and letting the virtuality or the fragility of the self manifest itself. When you are with somebody who really has that capacity to a full-blown level, it affects you. When we meet those kinds of people, it's clear, because the whole process is not individual, it's not private, and you enter into that kind of resonance. You relax — there's something very enjoyable about that. There's a joy in that kind of life; that's the good life, I'd say.

**COS:** How does that virtual self relate to what might be called, particularly in the social realm, the emerging whole?

**Francisco Varela:** We see more and more that the emerging self, again, is not a one-level process. There is an emergent process that happens recurrently that you can examine, say, at the level of the brain. There is a way in which the whole brain, if you focus on it, will show you how this emergence happens. But it would be a mistake to think that that's it, because there is a network of causality. In turn, these emergences occur within the social emergence of human life.

It is also the case that you have whole networks of other causalities in the longer time of evolution, in genetics, and the molecular constraints and what have you, so the emergence is also happening at that much more basic cellular level. So where is the emergence? In fact, it is like the multiple levels which articulate onto one another and constrain one another. **It's not very far from the recent insight in biology that evolution doesn't have one single unit of selection, but is multiple.** Life is individual, but it is also historically determined by the components that form [it]. **It is essentially a pattern of life — the entire biosphere. So if you don't have multiple levels of selection, you don't understand evolution at all.** It seems to me this is exactly the same for the individual. Maybe you could say that is why an individual is not just inside my head, that it is distributed over multiple levels and therefore is virtual. **I wish that insight about the distributiveness of what we call a subject would be taken more seriously.** Because there are lots of people who know that, but it stays at the level of the know-what. Developing a know-how, that you really incorporate into your blood and bones in day-to-day behavior, that is the process of transformation that needs the discipline and the methodologies that we're talking about. There are lots of people who understand that, but that doesn't make them change, because their habitual patterns are still there.

**COS:** So there would be a discipline where you would consciously employ your **self as an instrument** for the coming fore of something ... of emerging wholes.

**Francisco Varela:** A constant reframing of yourself into what seems to be more real. **You know, the paradox of being more real means to be much more virtual, and therefore**

**less substantial and less determined.** But that's more real; that seems to correspond more to what it is.

## VI. The Fragile Self Deploying Itself

**COS:** So how do you develop that capacity?

**Francisco Varela:** We're talking about exploiting the lineages of the different know-hows that we have evoked before; we went through some of those, and we all should continue to develop that more. There is no such thing as a free lunch, and you cannot bypass to engage in one or another style of relearning. [It is not for] me to say that there is just one kind of thing you can do. **People can have different approaches, but you've got to engage in that kind of discipline. Which is why, I think, extracting the common ground is very usable, because it will stop this silly thing about saying my technique is better than yours. No, what we need to construct is a long, very large conversation about how — to compare notes of the different journeys of different people.** But it has to be an engaging process; it has to engage you to go beyond the know-what to the know-how. That seems to me inevitable. Anything short of that is rehashing the same thing all over again.

**COS:** What's the role of love in developing the capacity of the virtual self?

**Francisco Varela:** Well, if you mean by love open compassion, the way in which one can be of service in a social context, it has everything to do with it. **Now let me take this perspective, which is either the Western perspective of phenomenology or a Buddhist perspective. Both of them coincide there, which to me is one of the really deep, interesting observations that we can have. The more the fragile self-subject deploys itself, the more compassion deploys itself because that's what it is. The more there is the opening into space to accommodate or to take care of the other, there is kind of an intrinsic decenteredness, and therefore the other appears closer. Solidarity, compassion, care, love — all of the different modes of being together — appear when the self owned is decentered. Now that, to me, is a great gift of the universe. Since we are not solid and private and centered, the more we get close to all our reality, the more we are who we are. That is, both you and I. Not just me, but the "us-ness" in us.** Which is another way of saying that my mind is not my mind. It is a mind that requires that **interbeing.** There is naturally that kind of concern and care and solidarity. But it is not just how nice I am, or how good a guy I am. It has nothing to do with this. It has to do with how **real things are, in reality, that non-distinction between the intersubjective network of things. When it's considered for what it is, when it is absorbed, or lived, or embodied for what it is, it works precisely in that mode of care and concern.** So you see the Buddhists have a wonderful message, saying that compassion is the natural condition of what one really is.

**COS:** Yes. May I ask a last question?

**Francisco Varela:** Please.

**COS:** In one of your books you quoted Merleau-Ponty's point that science and phenomenology are theoretical activities after the fact. The way I understood the enactive approach is that it's not theoretical, but a practical activity while bringing forth the fact. And my question is, because you mentioned that there are various levels of emergence, whether there might be a third type of cognition in which one would engage in a phenomenology or a cognizing where one would do a sort of aesthetic sensing and presencing before the fact, which probably would refer to the more fundamental or more subtle level of emergence.

**Francisco Varela:** The enactive approach is theory. You can theorize about know-how or [another] intrinsic action. Nevertheless, again, we're back to theories and practices. The practices can only be done by doing them. You can theorize and have a nice understanding, which is also good, but it ain't the same thing. So it's not that the enactive approach is closer to that transformation of learning. It can be useful, it can be a pointer to the right direction, but it ain't it. But for practice, the only thing is to do it. Now clearly, that brings us full circle to the question of actually engaging in practices of transformation. Those are closer to an intuitive or felt mode, which is closer to experience itself. Science and philosophy try to explain things and renounce doing. **You cannot talk about intuition of the unconscious or the spontaneity of emerging actions without actually being in them.** But just talking about an action doesn't do much except maybe stimulate steps. Is that the question, Otto?

**COS:** Well, no, I guess my question was whether you can conceive of a way of cognizing where you would do something prior to the coming forth of effect. Where the focus of doing would be prior, which is presencing.

**Francisco Varela:** Right. But isn't that mode of cognizing exactly what the whole point of the suspension, redirection is all about? In other words, it's like —

**COS:** Yeah, it's the redirection, right.

**Francisco Varela:** It's redirection. It's like being itself is capable of its own mode of immediate awareness. Another word I like is full presence. Some people might be tempted to call that intuitive or direct knowledge, or direct apprehension in Whitehead's term, or whatever. But it all goes back to cultivating the same ability. **A fully developed human being is presencing constantly, presencing the doing of theory.**

**COS:** And by presencing do you mean bringing into presence or you mean pre-sensing?

**Francisco Varela:** Well, maybe both or none. **It's presencing for me. It's to be there where things happen. In that sense of presencing you're present, your presence is there, and you're presencing — it's all three possible plays on the word. But it's something that clearly cannot be done if there is a little me there that's saying, "Oh, I'm presencing." The presencing has to exactly coincide with what it is.** That doesn't mean that it's unconscious. Becoming fully aware in that direct presence is usually what is very fragile. It is the most fragile thing, it constantly seems to move immediately to something else. Hence, the need to reenact it and relive it constantly, for life.

**COS:** What are the practices, also the collective practices, that we could use to develop these capacities?

**Francisco Varela:** There are some basic practices that one can make a little map of. We've talked a little bit about that. **But basically, I've come to the conclusion that what you're asking cannot be answered.** It is really, constantly, the practice that has to show what are the appropriate modes, depending on the situation. What is clear is that every group where these purposes or objectives or aspirations are present will be able to find its own means. But that is only true if we understand better and better what is the basic core. For example, [it is important] not to let people be discouraged, because when you try to practice suspension, for example, which is necessarily something that people will have to go through, it seems such a barren land. There is a perseverance to it, but in a specific form, say, in a particular style. It cannot be universal. I'm sure if one examines any interesting human group, you can really go in there and decompose what they have found out about the way of presencing. Now, in management, it's not done; it should be, must be, the same thing. But I'm not in a position to say more.

**COS:** Thank you very much, and my apologies for overextending the time so much.

**Francisco Varela:** I didn't even notice. Was this useful, Otto?

**COS:** It was most useful. It was right at the center of what we are doing.

**Francisco Varela:** Okay. And did you cover the questions you wanted?

**COS:** Yes, we did.

**Francisco Varela:** Well, good.

<sup>1</sup> The conversation with Francisco Varela took place as part of a larger interview project involving 25 interviews with eminent thinkers on knowledge and leadership (sponsored by the Society for Organizational Learning and McKinsey & Company). All interviews are accessible as free downloads from [www.dialogonleadership.org](http://www.dialogonleadership.org).

<sup>2</sup> F. Varela and J. Shear, *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> N. Depraz, F. Varela, and P. Vermersch, "The Gesture of Awareness, An Account of Its Structural Dynamics," in M. Velmans, ed., *Investigating Phenomenological Consciousness*. (Amsterdam: Benjamin Publishers, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> F. Varela and J. Shear, *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx.

<sup>6</sup> Francisco J. Varela, *Ethical Know-How : Action, Wisdom, and Cognition* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999).